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POST-SECONDARY PLANNING PARADOXES:  
HOW REGULAR KIDS PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE  
IN THE COLLEGE-FOR-ALL ERA

by

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and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Post-Secondary Planning Paradoxes:

How regular kids prepare for the future in the college-for-all era

By AUDREY ELIZABETH DEVINE ELLER

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This dissertation examines the interactional processes that lead to stratified post-secondary planning and outcomes among high school students. In contrast to most sociological research on education, I study “regular” students, neither the overachievers nor those at risk of dropping out. I address how the mundane details of students’ daily lives are patterned to produce and reproduce systems of privilege. In the first of two waves of research, I interviewed 28 New Jersey counselors. In the second wave, I spent two years shadowing students through 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades at one racially and socioeconomically diverse high school in the suburban fringe of New York City. Multiple ethnographic methods included focus groups, school-day shadowing and repeated interviews of 17 focal students, and interviews with teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators. I argue that students’ lives are structured by a series of paradoxes, beginning with the college-for-all paradox: we expect all students to go to college, and yet fewer than half do. I explore a number of sub-paradoxes that structure student experience in high school. First, some counselors employ a pedagogical role; they

scaffold post-secondary planning to foster a “dependent independence” that makes it (incorrectly) appear that students are doing it on their own. Second, New Jersey High School (NJHS) sends a series of complex mixed messages about college in response to a student body with diverse post-secondary outcomes. Mixed messages appear in formal and informal interactions and in the school’s institutional structures. NJHS tells students that college is for everyone, but it’s actually not for all of them. Third, students must navigate through these vague messages to figure out where they fit vis-à-vis their classmates and how that might inform their post-secondary plans. They must do this in a cultural space in which they are just learning which comparisons are acceptable and which must be left implicit. These strategies allow students to adjust their expectations while absolving teachers and counselors from giving advice that is difficult to hear. This leaves students with often mistaken impressions of solid college plans, and they thereby come to understand not going to college as a personal failure.

## Acknowledgement

I'm not quite sure, honestly, how I came to study education. It is not what I set out to do, as a new graduate student, and it is not why I came to Rutgers. But I am deeply grateful to the Rutgers Department of Sociology for giving me enough rope to do it, for supporting me financially and intellectually while I was here, and for becoming a stimulating intellectual environment that I will miss. First thanks in the graduate school story go to Jodi O'Brien at Seattle University, who assured me I wasn't crazy to turn down UCLA, and whose offhand comment about how academics trade money for creative freedom has shaped how I see my career and my work. So, too, did her insight that the beauty and the trouble with intellectual work is that it's unalienated labor. Next thanks go to Eviatar Zerubavel, whose mentorship in my early graduate school days was critical for helping me find my intellectual bearings.

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## Dedication

To the students who allowed me to build my work on their lives



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### NEGOTIATING PATHWAYS OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

As I write this introduction, in May 2012, the New York Times features a series on college debt. Two-thirds of students borrow from the government or private lenders; ten percent of them owe more than \$50,000 (Martin and Lehren, 2012). Why would a 17-year-old take on mortgage-like debt to pay a low-status private college for a degree she could have gotten for a fraction of the cost at her state university? Why would another student I know pay thousands of dollars for remedial courses he will fail before dropping out of his local community college? They are both victim to the increasingly perverse pressures of post-secondary transition in the “college-for-all” era. While post-secondary education is increasingly necessary for successful transition to the middle class (Breen and Jonnson, 2005; Carnevale et al., 2010; Hanushek et al., 2011; Herbert, 2008), and President Obama’s goal is to parachute the United States back into first place in degree attainment by 2020 (Obama, 2009), regular students are faced with a sea of advice and pressure and little actual guidance, information, or direction about how to navigate that transition.

Some of the questions facing teens today are practical: Should students follow their hearts, even if it means \$900 a month loan payments upon graduation? Should students start out at community colleges for cheaper credits before transferring? But these practical questions cut straight to the heart of key American values. We want to believe that everyone should pursue their dreams, and college view books tell us that this is just

what they specialize in. But how much is it worth to go to a private liberal arts college versus a state university? Is it worth \$100,000? How big is the risk or payout for racking up cheaper credits first? Is it worth the risk of noncompletion? And even dicier, ought we to counsel students to pursue their dreams in college when we know that great numbers of them will leave with debt but no degree or certification? Even beyond the financial considerations, what is our obligation to teens' mental and emotional health if they are burdened by debt or apparent college failure? Is a liberal arts education only something the children of the rich or near-rich or lucky can afford? Is a degree in English or art history only something the children of the rich can indulge (Ma, 2009)? Should students follow the old advice to go to the best college they can get admitted to, even when it costs more? How do we know what's a good college now, anyway?

These are questions that are not being raised with regular students as they approach the end of high school. They are not being raised because, as a culture, we are loathe to acknowledge the class structure, to tell a student that their dream is unrealistic and might well harm them along the way. We'd rather pretend that – especially now, with a “black” President – anyone can do anything. We know, from experience and the research, that students who don't go on to college will have lower lifetime earnings and less stable employment. And so rather than address the reality that half our students do not successfully complete even an Associate's degree, that college (whether or not we intend to include technical certifications in that category) might really not be the best plan for everyone, we pass them along, assuring them that everything will work out once they leave the high school and step onto the college campus. We are only recently, as a nation,

beginning to become aware of the pitfalls of this approach, and we know little about how students get through it. That is what this dissertation is about.

*Paradoxes as an Epistemology of Contradiction*

In the chapters that follow, I organize the discussion around several central paradoxes. This framework occurred to me late in the writing process, after much struggle trying to figure out how to reduce the data to simple, clear lessons. In particular, I wrestled continuously with the puzzles in Chapter 4, thinking that if I just went over it one more time it would be clear to me how students organized hierarchies in school and how they placed themselves vis-à-vis their classmates and their post-secondary futures. Finally it occurred to me that *students themselves* were also struggling to learn how to do this. It was no wonder I struggled to pin down precisely what the rules were, because they were negotiating and learning the rules as they went, too. No one – students, teachers, counselors, nor me – knew what the rules were for talking about stratification, effort, and reward in an apparently egalitarian school.

The reality is that the lives of regular kids in the college-for-all era are difficult and complex. Exploring them requires, as O'Brien suggests, developing an epistemology of contradiction. When I figured that out, I realized that this work complements other recent sociological analyses that highlight paradox and complexity. Pollock, too, frames race talk in an American school as a series of paradoxes (Pollock, 2004). Her words about race talk might, with very little adaptation, equally well be applied to college talk:

“All Americans, including this author, must fumble with race words often too clumsy to describe the precise realities; we must fumble with the knowledge that both using and deleting race words can serve alternately to dismantle racial orders and to reinforce them. Most frustrating, we all must negotiate a world in which our very confusions over when to talk as if race matters help re-create a world in which it does” (2004:17). Both my findings and Pollock’s resonate with the central paradox Khan (Khan, 2011) takes up in his ethnography of an elite prep school: that, after the twentieth century civil rights struggles, “twenty-first-century America is increasingly open yet relentlessly unequal” (2011:17). While Khan describes the students who are destined to be among America’s leaders, I describe what it is like for those students who are striving, with very uncertain payoff, and how they and their teachers and counselors come to terms with their place in a world we all want to believe is open to them. My hope is that framing my findings as a series of paradoxes highlights the extent to which social life continues to be messy, contradictory, and often painful, without easy solutions (O’Brien, 2009).

### *The Stories of Two Teens*

Ken and Toby are students at New Jersey High School (NJHS), where I did research during their junior and senior years. I wanted to know how students figured out what they would do after high school; not just the big decisions, but the little ones, the daily interactions that accumulated over time to shape their decisions. Ken and Toby agreed to participate in my research, allowing me to follow them around during school

and talk to them about their lives. I open this dissertation with their stories, and use their stories to explore the post-secondary planning process at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in central New Jersey.

I'm pretty sure that Ken and Toby do not know each other, maybe even never met; certainly, socially and academically they were worlds apart. They never shared a class in 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Ken was striving to get into the top 10% of the class; Toby was struggling to keep himself out of the bottom 10%. Ken graduated and went to Rutgers to study engineering, a future he seemed destined to achieve. Indeed, at first glance his path seems smooth, uncomplicated, and straight. Toby dropped out, got his GED, and continues to work full time at an auto body shop. His path seems crooked, with turning points and branches, rabbit holes to get lost in, a difficult path to navigate.

It is the apparently smooth and apparently troubled pathways out of high school that I want to begin with, to interrogate, and to problematize. The sociological puzzle is what makes it seem like Ken's life had no twists and turns, no decision points, no reversals, and why Toby's life did. But looking closely, we can see a number of turning points for Ken, a number of branches in the road he did not take. Why did Ken's path seem so much more straightforward, and so much easier? Why does Toby's path seem like failure? But first let me tell you about each of their lives.

*Ken: Getting What He Wants?*



Ken's family emigrated from Taiwan to be with his mother's family when he was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade; he has a sister five years older. Ken is a slight, small boy who looks younger than he is. He played tennis for the school team in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and was active in a Tai-Chi meditation group. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, he said he was looking for a job but couldn't take one that conflicted with his Rotary volunteering. He told me that, unfortunately, "every one time I hang out with friends I hang out like 30, 40 times with family". Mandarin was his only language when he immigrated, but by 11<sup>th</sup> grade, he prefers English – which causes misunderstandings with his father – and he says his Mandarin is good enough for everyday use but not for a debate.

Ken describes himself to me as friendly, with a flexible personality, and a "follower". He characterizes himself as lazy, telling me that "nothing's ever really planned unless other people plan it for me". His teachers would probably be surprised: one describes Ken as a good kid who blends in and keeps to himself, keeps his head down and does his work. He's in the 84<sup>th</sup> percentile with a 4.5 GPA (weighted for his AP classes).

When he first came to the US, Ken was considered gifted at math, and he learned numbers first. He's apologetic about not doing so well in Algebra 2 as a sophomore, so as a junior he was placed in Trigonometry with seniors instead of Pre-Calc with other juniors. He also took a Java programming class, and told me he was on a path to major in computer engineering. His sister was encouraging him to look at MIT, where at one point he thought he'd go if he could get in. His senior year, he took honors Physics (the highest offered, because he "did okay" in science), AP Computer Science, AP Government, AP English, and Calculus. He was worried that two of his AP teachers were new and he

wouldn't be prepared for the exams. He was bummed that he was in Calculus level 1 instead of AP – though in the end it worked out because it was a chance for him to relax in school. And he really would have liked to trade out his study hall for Statistics, but it was the wrong period. He thought about taking the Stats AP exam anyway: he'd have to “self-learn” but he said, “I'm not really doing anything productive at home anyway”.

By the spring of his senior year, Ken was excited about doing a summer engineering program at Rutgers through the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF)<sup>1</sup>. He seems to have followed a simple path laid out for him: take advanced math and science classes in high school, then get a scholarship to study engineering at Rutgers – no potholes here.

But his junior year, Ken told me that he wasn't as interested in math anymore, and preferred English and History. He told me, “According to other people I'm more like white-washed and like I care about American culture more than my own”. He liked having a strict AP History class 2<sup>nd</sup> period, because it's “a bit more of a challenge, it kind of like wakes me up for the day”. He thought his senior year AP English class would pay off in college, and says, “I kinda just thought like maybe I could be like this family overachiever in English”. He followed his AP English teacher's advice not to take early release, because it wouldn't look good on college applications. So why is Ken studying

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<sup>1</sup> The Educational Opportunity Fund is a national, state-supported program that provides grants for post-secondary education. Its mission statement is: “EOF contributes to the development of a college-educated public that reflects the diversity of New Jersey, by working in partnership with New Jersey colleges and universities and the K-12 educational system to provide access to higher education for students from families/communities disadvantaged by low income and the lack of access to the quality educational preparation necessary to attend college (NJ Higher Education, 2011).”

engineering? At some point he made the decision to follow a path toward engineering that led him away from the history and English classes he loves.

Another puzzle is his choice of college. At the end of his senior year, Ken tells me that he knew he was going to Rutgers since his sister went when he was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and all his cousins and most of his friends went there too, and it's cheap, especially as he could live at home. But his junior year, he wasn't so sure; he said he wanted to see more of the world, and even applied to NYU and a handful of other engineering schools he couldn't remember. He thought about applying to Harvard or Yale as a joke – he's almost at their 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, he said. Then he got a phone interview with NYU but the message got deleted, and he didn't follow up on it; by that point, he figured it wasn't that much better than Rutgers academically.

In many contexts, Ken sees continuity where others might see change; he tells me that in college his life will be “same thing just new people new place”. He seems content to follow in his sister's footsteps: she attended Rutgers on scholarship for computer science, lived on campus her first two years then moved home, got a good job after graduation. His path seems inevitable from this perspective.

We might call that phone call from NYU a “fateful moment”, a pivoting point in his college narrative, if he had followed up on it and perhaps gone to NYU. But because he didn't, the phone call fades into the background, and in retrospect it seems like Ken had a straight and narrow path to Rutgers. His desire to “see the world” at a more-distant college also easily disappears from thought. Another such moment is his decision to pursue engineering instead of history or English; because his choice happens in consonance with what is expected of him by his family and by stereotype, he hardly even

realizes he is making a choice. For example, he and his parents think he's lazy, but he took three AP classes his senior year, and got his best grades ever. He does not feel himself making decisions, but he is making them – or they are being made for him – in a way that pushes him along a particular path.

*Toby: Getting What He Doesn't Want?*

In contrast to Ken's, Toby's story seems full of difficulties and reversals; his path never seems predestined, and countless moments emerge as turning points. Toby, a New Jersey native, lives with his mom, stepdad, and two foster and one adopted toddlers. He does not get along well with his mom and stepdad; they yell and he has periodic fistfights with his stepdad. Add that to the three babies, five dogs and dozens of birds his stepdad keeps, and "all you hear is crying barking bird yelling. It's like walkin in a fuckin zoo. [...] like I wish I could just walk into a nice calm clean peaceful house". Toby's father lives down the street, and they see each other regularly, though the father's drug and alcohol problems frequently interfere with their relationship.

Toby is a stoner; he's medium-height with blond-red hair, and his physical appearance and demeanor vary wildly, depending on what's going on in his life – sometimes he's lively, fun, witty, and well-kept; sometimes he's bleary-eyed from marijuana, disheveled, and subdued. His crowd is vulgar and racist – they're all white, which is notable at NJHS – and frequently in trouble with the police. Toby describes himself to me as relaxed, crazy, and loud, and, in one of his many surprisingly self-

reflective moments, tells me he fits in best with “the failures”. Regarding his teachers, he says, “I think some of them think that I’m, you know, good and goin’ somewhere, and some of ‘em think I’m just a piece of shit”. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Toby is in the 11<sup>th</sup> percentile with a 1.76 GPA (weighted).

Since middle school, Toby’s wanted to become a diesel mechanic instead of going to college; he says, “half the kids that go to college don’t even know what they’re doing there you know”. Toby would rather not be in school. He says, “It’s important but I feel if everybody didn’t judge people on how far they went and stuff, I wouldn’t be here. I feel like I have better things I could be doing with my life, and this is just like a waste of my life”. He would rather be working full-time at the auto body shop next door to his house where he works part time, 3 to 7 every day after school. He loves the work, but he’s also paying off legal fees - \$7000, in \$150 weekly installments to his mom – from when he threw rocks at cars at age 15 and got a year of probation.

Toby struggled in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, failing a lot of classes, and so by the beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, it looked like dropping out was inevitable. He hated his schedule, packed full with repeats and remedial courses to prepare him for the HSPA<sup>2</sup>. He feels that he “should do more [homework] but there’s not that much given”, and he usually sleeps through most of his classes. Toby’s mom encouraged him to drop out, get his GED, and go to the Coast Guard like his uncle. Toby’s path – like Ken’s – seems to be leading him straight out of school. His own wishes and goals, his mother’s explicit desire that he leave the house, the long and unengaging schedule required by the school: all these make

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<sup>2</sup> The High School Proficiency Assessment, New Jersey’s high school exit exam.

dropping out seem inevitable. But two days after dropping out, he changed his mind and re-enrolled. He said the idea of the GED made him feel like a failure. “I really felt like it was a stupid idea [laughs]. At least I was smart enough to come back after like only 2 days.”

This turning point was accompanied by key intervention by Toby’s counselor, who figured out a schedule that would allow Toby to complete all his credits. I asked him if he felt like he got what he wanted from his counselor. He said, “No I feel like I get what I don’t want” – that is, more support for moving towards graduation, which means more school work. Indeed, Toby really pulled it together throughout his junior year. He passed all his classes, didn’t have to take summer school for the first time, and passed the HSPA on his first try. Things were looking up.

Over the summer, Toby signed with the Marines and would head to boot camp in July after graduation. He’d get to study diesel mechanics. He was in pretty good shape after working out with them 2-3 days a week all summer. He had to quit smoking pot, too, because they tested him regularly. Even so, he was somewhat ambivalent about the plan. He told me, “I feel like I hope I don’t change my mind by the time that time comes around, you know. Cuz I’ve already sucked. So I feel it would be good, a good thing for me. I feel like it’s like one of my smarter decisions that I’ve made in my life”. And he’s finally paid off the lawyers, and started saving money, hoping to move out.

In the midst of all this good news, Toby totals his truck on a crazy summer night. He struggles with getting up early enough to catch the bus in the fall. And Toby’s mom was so proud of his successes in 11<sup>th</sup> grade – the counselor tells me – she took Toby on a family cruise as a reward, in September. He missed 7 or 8 days of school, which is the

maximum for the semester, so now he's really back on the brink again. The counselor pulled strings to help him stay on track with his credits, but his full schedule including two gyms is really starting to wear on him. Even so, Toby tells me that he feels good to have made it to graduation, that it makes him feel he's not an idiot. He thinks the Marines – with guaranteed jobs, guaranteed loans – makes sense. In a year, he thinks he'll be on active duty, "making mad money".

Still, he's constantly worried about losing credits for his absences. When I go to school with him in the fall of his senior year, he notices how much he and his friends talk about drugs and reflects, "Man, I gotta start doing something more successful with my life." By February the news came out that summer school had been cut from the school budget. This seems to have been the final nail in the coffin, and Toby told me he was going to drop out: "because I was gonna have to go to summer school cuz I failed so bad and then I heard that they cut the summer schools, and then everybody who had to go to summer school was gonna have to stay back. And I was like, if I can go to adult school, cuz I was already talking about adult school before that, if I can go to adult school and get my diploma in a couple weeks, why the hell am I gonna go to a whole nother year of high school you know? Plus I needed to work more hours to make more money cuz I have so much stuff to pay off."

Adult school seems like a perfect opportunity; the placement test showed he'd only have to take two weeks of classes and then he could walk with his NJHS class at graduation. He can graduate, yet be able to work more and not have to suffer through school. But between placement test and classes, he got in another car accident and lost his transportation.

Meanwhile, he was arrested after a physical altercation with a shopkeeper on his street. He got off easy, with probation and debt, but his friend got sent to juvie. The Marines dropped him, which gave him one less reason to stay and graduate. He said he wasn't happy about that, but he was relieved.

Then, suddenly, Toby was out of school, and his life got better again. Despite what to the outside world looks like utter failure, Toby seems the happiest and most stable he's been in two years. He's reflective about where he messed up, and has some regrets; in particular, he thought he'd graduate. But he likes his job, his co-workers, and his boss. He sees his friends more now, working 9 to 5, than when he was in school and working evenings. He's got a new girlfriend he says is keeping him out of trouble. And he's scheduled to take the GED and thinking about the Army or tech school for diesel mechanics in the fall.

*Reading Toby's Story Against Ken's*

Toby's story helps us see how many turning points there are along the road out of high school. It shows us how complicated post-secondary pathways can be: teens are making major life decisions that impact their lifetime economic stability, and yet the decisions can happen in tiny moments and seem – especially to the teens themselves – utterly inconsequential at the moment. And the number of moments at which these decisions could be made, reversed, remade, are uncountable. It is likely that *every* student's pathway has as many turning points as Toby's, but more typically the outcome



from the turning point is more reliable, more predictable and – therefore – much more difficult to see, as with Ken. When we look at Ken’s life, it is so easy to gloss over the apparent contradictions and “missing” forks in the road and simply see a straight, smooth road. It is important to problematize that perspective, and thinking about it using Toby as a contrast helps us do that. Toby’s story helps us see where the turning points might have been and how many there are, because he was thrown so radically from one path to another so many times.

Toby’s story also helps us think through what we mean when we talk about successful pathways out of high school. It tells us that we cannot necessarily define in advance what “success” means or who will “succeed”. On paper, Toby seems like a failure – beating up shopkeepers, dropping out of high school – and many of his teachers probably agree. Yet at the close of high school he seems to me to be one of the happiest, most self-reflective among the students I followed, and is working in a stable skilled job he’s held for three years. From this perspective, Toby’s on the right path, a path which he laid the foundation for as early as middle school. But his vision of success doesn’t really fit our dominant cultural narratives of college-for-all.

What Toby reminds me is that I have to try very hard to step outside the dominant cultural framework which defines success as school success, and – even more importantly – to look for where those turning points are in *every* student’s story, to interrogate where and how pathways branch, and why students take one branch or another. It is often said that roads look straight in retrospect, but in fact I think post-secondary planning pathways are the opposite: they usually look straight from the

student's perspective, as they move forward in their lives – and only in retrospect is it easy to see the turns and forks.

### *Defining and Predicting Success*

Toby's story helps us disrupt some of our taken-for-granted notions and definitions of success and promise. Thinking through Toby's story has helped me think about what makes a given post-secondary outcome "surprising". It's the surprises that we like to explain, Murray Davis tells us (Davis, 1971) – students who go against stereotype or the literature. This propelled me in to thinking about which students had "expected" or "unexpected" outcomes – terms which, while useful for initially thinking through my students, I quickly realized needed to be problematized. The more I thought about "expectedness", the less useful it became. Expected at what point? By whom? When Toby dropped out the first time, what did we expect for him? When his counselor got requirements waived so he could come back, what did we expect for him? And how can we possibly sort out what we expected in retrospect? Why did we expect Ken to major in engineering – just because he is an Asian immigrant who was pegged as good at math before he developed English fluency? Then I began to think about sorting my students in terms of who had a "promising" future and who didn't. Again, I want to problematize this term. Our cultural narrative is so strongly engraved that school failure is moral failure, and that college equals success, that it's difficult even to find words or a framework to challenge those notions. What actually ends up "working" for a given student might not

be what teachers or parents would consider success. Indeed, as Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum, 2001) might remind us, in a world where only about half our students are starting at four-year colleges, holding that as our standard is bizarre. Nevertheless, we have relatively stable mainstream standards by which we typically judge “promise” – school success, intelligence, expectation of four-year college. By these standards, Ken is “promising”; Toby is not. Traditional definitions of success generally mean fulfilling high expectations of school achievement and four-year college, or rising above expectations toward those goals. But, again, it’s important to problematize that term, because not all students who get to a four-year college will be successful in their *own* estimation, and others will feel successful without college. By these standards, Ken is successful, and Toby is not. But how certain are we about either judgment? Should Ken have pursued English or history instead of engineering? Is Toby – stable job, GED – unsuccessful?

This leads us back to the questions with which I opened this chapter, and leaves us with the task of sorting out what higher education means in the contemporary United States. It is real peoples’ lives and livelihoods that are at stake. In the next section, I discuss what the sociological literature has to say about the transition out of high school, and how my study weighs in at an important historical moment.

### *Inarticulacies*

It is hard to talk about post-secondary futures in a complex way. This is, perhaps, even more true for the dedicated professionals who spend their days, and often their

nights, weekends, and money, nurturing teens toward post-secondary destinations. Classrooms always have a mix of students with a mix of desires and abilities; time always runs short. And teachers and counselors have little professional training for post-secondary counseling. They rely heavily on the routes they took and what they experienced, but their route (usually straight out of high school to a five-year teaching degree) is uncommon and the world of higher ed is changing quickly. That is to say, the quotes I cite from school professionals often paint them in a less than flattering light. This is partly due to the constraints I have just outlined: they don't always know they are giving bad advice, for example. It is also partly due to my analytical focus. I think it is clear that we, as a society, are not doing a stellar job preparing students for life after high school, and that focus highlights weaknesses in the school. It is also partly due to a common sociological phenomenon of "backstage" talk (Goffman, 1986; 1974). Most professionals vent and joke about their work, when out of public spotlight. Because I became a part of the school, I was often privy to such backstage talk. While I made an effort in the field to respect privacy, it is true that people in the school often included me as an insider, and from that status I drew insight about the normal, everyday workings of the school. Those insights are reflected here. I could easily have written about the strengths of the school, and I beg forgiveness from school professionals who are thus often portrayed somewhat one-sidedly.

## CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

As increasing numbers of students complete high school in the United States, college has come to function as a gate-keeping mechanism to the American middle class. Students without college degrees are unlikely now to be able to support a family on one income, to be able to buy a house, or to have access to affordable and high quality health care. Since the 1970s, only those with college degrees have seen real wage increases (Leonhardt, 2010). Men with college degrees earned 64% more than men with high school degrees in 2005 (Long, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). And the more recent Georgetown study shows that people with more education make – and will continue to make – more money (Carnevale and Smith, 2011)<sup>3</sup>. Those who attend even one year of post-high school education reap financial rewards, and so not surprisingly, college has become a near-universal goal: the percentage of students expecting to go is in the high 90s (Clydesdale, 2007; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). By 2018, nearly two thirds of all jobs will require some post-secondary education, and nearly half will require at least an Associate’s degree (Carnevale et al., 2010).

But nationally, in 2006, less than 60% of high school graduates went on to any college, and about half them went to two-year colleges (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). While in general students who complete Bachelor’s degrees have higher incomes than those who complete Associate’s degrees, much depends on the major and occupation; nearly a third of people with an Associate’s degree make at least as much as the average

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<sup>3</sup> Although “the existence of these returns is highly dependent on one’s ability to obtain access to jobs in college labor market occupations” (Harrington and Sum, 2010), as any art history major-cum-bartender knows.

Bachelor's degree holder (Carnevale et al., 2010). The key point is that it matters *what* post-secondary education teens are going on to, and it matters what they study there. Both where they go and what they study are associated with teens' family background. At four-year colleges, students from low-SES families are more likely to choose lucrative majors; high-SES girls are likely to choose less lucrative majors (Ma, 2009).

And where students go is not random. Despite increasing access to post-secondary education, the poorest students are attending college in declining rates, and minority students and those with low test scores are more likely to attend two-year colleges, where transfer rates to four-year colleges are weakening (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Hout, 2008; Long, 2007; Roksa, 2008). The differentiation is not only occurring at the bottom end of the post-secondary structure. Four-year colleges are increasingly strapped for cash and looking for "full payers"; in state institutions this translates into increased numbers of out-of-state students who pay more tuition. The fifty most selective liberal arts colleges in the US enrolled collectively less than 0.6% of all Pell Grant enrollments in 2006 (Douglass and Thomson, 2008). There are incentives beyond the financial, though. Increasing pressure to raise completion rates is another incentive to admit more full-time, traditional-age students (Carnevale, 2010), who are more likely to be white and middle-class.

Because of all this, understanding how students transition out of high school is key to understanding US class structure, mobility, and the intergenerational transmission of privilege or inequality. As a gate-keeping mechanism, college functions as a filter that allows some people to achieve desired social benefits while shutting others out (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 [1977]; Karen, 2002; Lemann, 2000). The transition out of high

school is thus a watershed event, changing the life trajectories of students as they set off on different paths.

*Schooling as a Mechanism of the Reproduction of Class Advantage*

The ideology of the American dream – that anyone can pull herself up by the bootstraps to achieve success, no matter her roots – necessitates that opportunities be (or seem) equal, which in turn has become tied to the equality of access to public education. Americans tend to believe that with access to equal educations, any students should be able to overcome difficulties of a disadvantaged background and achieve personal and financial success. And indeed, some sociologists of education have recently found leveling effects within schools (Downey et al., 2004) – that is, that while middle-class children have been seen to learn faster than poor students, the inequalities in learning rates between the groups are narrowed while those students are in school. Nevertheless, one of the most stable and abiding sociological findings about education is that educational attainment is affected by class origins (e.g., Ishida et al., 1995). Poor students attend college in the United States at rates far lower than wealthier students (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006a). Education researchers have, therefore, been intensely interested in documenting and ameliorating systematic educational inequalities. In particular, they have attempted to discover the mechanisms that produce or reproduce inequalities, ranging from the large-scale (e.g., income or wealth inequality: see Downey et al., 2004; Ishida et al., 1995; Roscigno, 1999), to the

medium-scale (e.g., tracking: see Lucas and Good, 2001), to the small-scale (e.g., interactional differences and stereotype threat, see Downey and Pribesh, 2004; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Mehan, 1992; Steele and Aronson, 1998; Tyson, 2003).

### *The College-For-All Paradox and the Diversification of Higher Education*

Together, these pressures – the clear need for more students to go on to post-secondary education, alongside the increasing inequality involved – create what I call the “college-for-all” paradox. The college-for-all (CFA) debate, in the sociology of education literature as well as among policymakers, is heated and important. The “college-for-all” approach (apparently advocated by President Obama, among many others) is popular for its apparent egalitarianism. As high schools quit funneling students towards or away from college over the past several decades, and made some progress toward de-tracking, now even the lowest track students are expected to go on to post-secondary training. Indeed, at some schools the lowest track is called “College Prep”. Rosenbaum (2001) was the first prominent critic. He finds the ethos of meritocracy behind CFA troubling, because it seems to ignore half our students. Rosenbaum points out that few who begin at two-year colleges ever complete their degrees; fewer than 10% of such students complete a Bachelor’s degree; and the six year completion rate of Associate’s degrees for those with low grades is only 14% (Rosenbaum, 2001). And many of those who finish even Bachelor’s degrees leave with life-long debt the size of a mortgage, as has attracted



recent media attention (Martin and Lehren, 2012). Rosenbaum called for a drastic improvement in the amount of information high school seniors have in planning their futures and in articulation between high schools, post-secondary education, and employment.

A recent debate in the journal *Sociology of Education* highlights the paradox at the center of CFA. Domina et al. (Domina et al., 2011) argue that a core critique of CFA is the assertion that increasing college aspirations implies reduced effort on the part of high school students. After all, the argument goes, if they believe that everyone can go to college (especially given open-access options like community colleges), then what incentive is there for them to work hard or put forth effort in high school? Domina et al (2011) find little support for this theory among 7<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> graders; indeed, they argue that “students are slightly more engaged today than they would have been had the college-for-all ethos not taken hold in American schools” (2011: 108-109). Overall, they find that higher expectations boost effort, except for the bottom decile of students. They thus explicitly critique Rosenbaum’s assertion that CFA fails the bottom half of students. Domina et al. conclude that high aspirations generally means high effort, which they see as a positive outcome.

Rosenbaum (2011) responds by arguing that, in essence, Domina et al. have missed his main point: “raising plans by itself can be a cruel charade that ignores the many serious barriers to college degree completion, and it leads to a high probability of dropping out without having earned a credential and often with no payoff” (2011:112). He focuses on the 80 percent of low-achieving seniors with college plans who will fail to get any degree in the next 8 to 10 years, and worries that focusing on students’ college

plans risks students blaming themselves for not having sufficiently high aspirations (2011:116). Ever the pragmatist, Rosenbaum concludes, “Encouraging students to raise their plans may squeeze more effort out of them but runs the risk of denying students the opportunity to look for more realistic options that could have good payoffs with higher probabilities” (2011:117). Indeed, Domina et al.’s narrow focus on high school effort obscures what happens when those students with high aspirations, who have worked very hard in high school, are still underprepared for the post-secondary options they know about. It’s not clear to me that it’s a good plan to boost student expectations *and* student effort, and then allow those dreams to be dashed because their efforts don’t amount to degrees.

The CFA paradox revolves around the dilemma of how we advise teens in this situation. College seems necessary, yet half of students won’t go. The growing literatures on high schools focus almost exclusively on college-bound students, treating all other students as “negative cases” (Stevens, 4/25/2007). Should we continue to assume that college is and should be the goal for all high school graduates? Advising students *away* from college is both politically and ethically dubious, particularly when it amounts to advising “other peoples’ children” away from college (Goldrick-Rab, 2011). It is not realistic to expect teens to know – without being told – that they risk noncompletion if they go to two-year colleges. But telling them that they risk noncompletion edges up dangerously close to discouraging them from high aspirations. And teens (and their parents) often have quite strikingly little or inaccurate college knowledge. For example, it became clear to me during an interview with a parent that for her “college” meant a two-year school and “university” meant a four-year school.

This raises what I believe is a critical, ignored fact. Any debate about CFA debate must examine the assumptions about what, exactly, is meant by “college”. President Obama is often characterized as touting CFA, but here is what he actually promoted in his 2009 State of the Union speech: “I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma” (Obama, 2009). His request is backed by good data showing that post-secondary education or training will be necessary for jobs. But note the breadth of the possibilities he includes: from apprenticeship to four-year degrees! Apprenticeship and vocational training are not what we normally mean by CFA, and they have all but disappeared from our high schools as valid options (Krei and Rosenbaum, 2001). And even if we restrict our discussion to traditional majors in the Associate’s and Bachelor’s degree, a wide range of schools offers an even wider range of completion rates, debt, and employability. The way in which we conflate all these varied post-secondary options at the policy level contributes to the muddle with which counselors and teens understand their options on a practical level. Indeed, the whole CFA debate quickly unravels when we fail to specify what we mean. Even Rosenbaum might be characterized as supporting CFA if we include the short-term certificates he advocates which are more likely to pay off for low-achieving seniors. But such training makes up a significant proportion of the projected jobs for today’s teens (Carnevale and Smith, 2011), so it makes sense to encourage those who are interested. In short, neither students nor policymakers nor researchers are sufficiently parsing “college” when we engage in the CFA debate.

Higher education has diversified and expanded tremendously over the past generation. Diversification refers to the wide variety of types of post-secondary education, from four-year colleges to technical schools, from public to private to for-profit. There are more seats in higher ed than ever before, but those seats are also more competitive than ever before. Students, colleges, and employers alike are scrambling to understand whether degrees and even credits from these various institutions are of comparable quality (Brint and Karabel, 1989; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Roksa, 2008; Stevens et al., 2006). Understanding the transition to higher education cannot be complete without a clear picture of how the various options are connected to each other and their relative success and pay-off in the labor market. Community colleges are attractive to students who cannot afford or gain admission to other schools. Those who attend even one year of post-high school education reap financial rewards, but college-going rates differ systematically by race and class, and there are strikingly different outcomes (in completion, job preparedness, and wages) for different types of post-secondary education (Jacobson and Mokher, 2009). But two-year schools are not a guaranteed route to a bachelor's degree, for even as college entrance rates rise, college completion rates are falling, especially for weaker students at community colleges (Hout, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001). Data from CUNY indicate that as many as 60% of students with a C or lower average fail to earn either an AA or a BA (Attewell and Lavin, 2007). Students with Associate's degrees may be little better off than those without any credentials, but they also often have difficulty transferring credits into 4-year schools (Jacobson and Mokher, 2009; Lederman, 2008). We must therefore problematize what is meant by a "successful"

transition to post-secondary education by questioning what outcomes students achieve (and indeed whether those are the outcomes the students themselves wanted).

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

In this dissertation, I weigh in on this debate by showing what it's like for "regular" students in a college-for-all context to find their way through and out of high school. I show the difficulty they have in understanding their place in the world when they have little access to good post-secondary outcome data, and little sense of how the myriad post-secondary options compare. I observe how post-secondary planning unfolds through daily interactions over time, and how student decisions are shaped by their access to information and counseling, their relationships with peers, their negotiations with parents, and their own goals and desires for the future. By studying "regular" students, I attempt to sidestep – at least temporarily – the question of whether all students *ought* to be preparing for college, and instead look at their life experiences. We don't know much about the goals, aspirations, institutional contexts, and preparation of students who turn out not to go to college, or what tips a student toward a four-year versus a two-year college. We brand them, or their schools, as failures in retrospect, though we do not know how they got to that point or what might have changed their pathways. I address, from the students' perspectives, how these separate but interconnected social realms shape the pathways they take, the circumstances under which their decisions are made, and what this means for research on the transition out of high school.

*Transitions Out of High School or Transitions into College?*

Comprehensive reviews of the literature to date (Stevens et al., 2006; Stevens et al., 2008; Transitions Committee and Practitioners Advisory Group, 2007) focus – like the literature itself – on the transition *into* higher education, rather the transition *out of* high school. By looking at it in this way, we miss any substantive discussion of students who do not follow a “traditional” path into two- or four-year colleges, and we risk forgetting that there is middle ground between dropping out and attending an elite college (Koyama, 2007; Trent et al., 2007). “Preparation” is often narrowly defined as schooling leading to four-year college, rather than any more holistic measure of students’ engagement with school, peers, family, and community, or guidance for a full range of career pathways (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Transitions Committee and Practitioners Advisory Group, 2007) – though attention to community colleges is increasing, e.g. in MDRC’s experiments and the Gates Foundation’s commitment to funding (Brock and LeBlanc, 2005; Jaschik, 2008). For example, students may not perceive attendance at a traditional 4-year college as in their familial and economic interests (Jacobson and Mokher, 2009; Valadez, 2008), but high schools are often evaluated on the percentage of students attending 4-year schools. In this project I focus on the intake end of the transition pipeline, and problematize notions of “successful” transitions by seeking educators’, parents’, and students’ own potentially conflicting definitions.

### *What Do Regular Students Do?*

The gate-keeping functions of college heighten anxiety among middle- and upper-middle-class families about the increasing competitiveness of colleges. Many students (and their parents!) go to extremes to increase their chances of admission, especially at the most prestigious schools. The test prep industry and the admissions counseling businesses are both strong; nearly half of all high school juniors say they participate in test prep of some sort (Devine-Eller, 2012). The media loves stories about “overachiever” students who are carefully groomed (by themselves, parents, schools, private tutors) for prestigious 4 year colleges. The New York Times and other media sources regularly run pieces highlighting the crazy (and usually unhealthy) lengths to which students go to increase their chances of admission (Brooks, 2001; Rimer, 2007), and exposés-cum-how-to books abound (Golden, 2006; Robbins, 2006; Sacks, 2007; Steinberg, 2002). And paradoxically, as seats in college increase, admission to those seats – or at least the ones at the top – is increasingly competitive. These are bolstered by the practically endless list of “how-to” books by and for high school students, parents, counselors that give advice on crafting a competitive college application.

So the focus on the “college-bound” student is often a focus on the elite student and elite institutions. While discussions of gatekeeping necessarily attend the elite, an exclusive attention to them results in research that is useful for understanding mechanisms of class reproduction at the top but not necessarily for a comprehensive theory about inequality in a world of expanding and diversifying higher-ed options (Attewell, 2001; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Golden, 2006; Karabel, 2005; Karen, 1990;

Killgore, 2003; Steinberg, 2002; Stevens, 2007). After all, only a small number of relatively affluent students are hiring private college admissions counselors; this is not the experience of most high school students. A narrow focus on them can obscure the elite students' cultural, economic, and structural privilege.

Scholars also have concentrated on at-risk and vulnerable populations, and have a good idea of the challenges they face in impoverished communities and failing schools (for a range of examples, see Fine, 1991; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Kozol, 2005; Osgood, 2005). We have a fairly good understanding of how and why students drop out of high school (Brown and Rodríguez, 2009; Dei, 1997), and a great deal of academic and popular attention is paid to vulnerable populations and struggling students and schools.

However, we know very little about what the rest of the students are doing as they prepare to leave high school. In particular, we know little about teens who are not bound for college or who, if they are, are unlikely to get through (Stevens, 4/25/2007). By focusing on what one counselor called “the middle 80 percent”, the majority who often remain under the radar because they are not necessarily destined for dropping out or for prestigious four-year colleges, I am able to explore students' pathways out of high school without any certainty in advance about where they will land. What I call “regular” students – those in the middle 80 percent by GPA – at NJHS could end up at selective four-year colleges, could drop out, or anything in between. Thus my study makes an innovative and substantive contribution to the literature.

“Regular” students are most important to study precisely because they are most typical, the most numerous, and because they are not yet objects of interest to academics



or the wider media. As a group, their futures are less determined than the futures of the top or bottom decile students. Regular students are paradoxically the ones about whom academics and counselors know the least. I cast an analytic gaze on these “unmarked” students (Brekhus, 1998), seeking to avoid a deficit model that imagines they do nothing while the “overachievers” busy themselves with college prep.

We risk characterizing them as a homogeneous comparison group, when in fact this group is likely the most diverse in terms of experiences and post-secondary outcomes. Studies on the everyday factors which impact opportunity structures, expectations, and post-secondary planning for this middle demographic are lacking. In fact, few sociological studies interrogate class reproduction for the middle classes (Newman and Chen, 2007), even as the middle class in the United States shrinks. This focus eclipses a rich descriptive and theoretical understanding of students’ lives as they leave high school, while applying a uniform definition of success. My dissertation addresses these gaps by explicitly taking up the students who are usually ignored (Jones, 2008; Krei and Rosenbaum, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Rosenbaum, 2001).

### *The Reproduction Tradition*

Contrary to popular belief that schooling levels the playing field, many education researchers follow Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) “reproduction theory”: that schools prepare students for different class positions through different school experiences. That is, schooling is a mechanism of class mobility or reproduction of class advantage. Despite

some evidence that schooling tends to equalize the achievement of students across class origins (e.g., Bowen and Bok, 1998; Downey et al., 2004), one of the most stable and abiding sociological findings is that educational attainment is affected by class origins (e.g., Ishida et al., 1995; Karen, 2002).

The literature is founded largely on the premise that the school is a site of social reproduction, in which the school reinforces the marginality of already-marginalized populations, and reinscribes the class regime in its student body and on its students' bodies (Dei, 1997). At the same time, the school naturalizes the differentiation it performs, by attributing that differentiation to real differences in student ability or interest (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 [1977]; Foucault, 1995 [1975]; Khan, 2011; MacLeod, 2004 [1987]; Willis, 1981 [1977]). The school thus acts to legitimize inequality. For Bowles and Gintis, this means that schools fundamentally teach students to accept their lot in life, individualizing and internalizing school failure. This is what happened with MacLeod's *Brothers*: they strove for upward mobility, and when that didn't happen, they came to blame themselves for not working hard enough.

Though critiqued now for its rather deterministic and overdrawn conclusions, the Bowles and Gintis' reproduction framework laid the theoretical groundwork for education researchers. For example, Willis (1981 [1977]) developed a sophisticated argument about how working class students' resistance against school authorities led them to choose working-class jobs, cementing their place in the class structure. Though this is in harmony with the reproduction theory, Willis argued against rigid structuralism, and claimed that "cultural forms cannot be reduced or regarded as the mere epiphenomenal expression of basic structural factors" (174) – that is, he is arguing for the

relative autonomy of culture. Moreover, he argues that ideology has “deep disjunctions” (175) that make cultural reproduction an open question.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990 [1977]) also made an argument for the relative autonomy of culture from economics, by introducing the idea of distinctive cultural knowledge passed along through families. Developing the idea, Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) claims that this “cultural capital” gives upper-class students linguistic and cultural competencies that are recognized and rewarded by schools but that we misrecognize as being developed by the schools. In other words, schools reward students for what they bring to schooling, not for how they perform once they are in the system; this privileges the already-privileged. In addition, Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) proposes that different types of capital can be exchanged; for example, parents’ economic capital can transfer into their children’s cultural capital when children learn highbrow tastes such as classical music, theatre, art, and ballet. While this theoretical development certainly improves the flexibility and subtlety of reproduction theories, it is lacking in two ways (Mehan, 1992). First, it does not specify the mechanisms by which schools differently value the cultural capital of students. (How, that is, does attending the ballet translate into better grades in school?) Second, it runs the risk of characterizing students as empty vessels bearing the cultural capital of their parents, rather than as engaged social actors themselves.

Working in the Bourdieudian tradition, Lareau (2003) provides ethnographic data about the mechanisms of cultural capital. Her research highlights how relations between

home and school differ by class, among elementary school children<sup>4</sup>. She finds that though poor, working-class and middle-class parents want their children to succeed, middle-class parents are able to “get involved” in ways that promote success for their children (such as viewing education as a shared responsibility between parents and teachers, attending parent-teacher conferences, questioning and criticizing schools and teachers, helping students with homework, and obtaining expert help). Lareau calls their parenting style “concerted cultivation”, a logic of childrearing that views children as projects parents consciously and conscientiously develop. In contrast, poor and working-class parents use a parenting style Lareau calls the “accomplishment of natural growth”; these parents believe that children will develop in healthy ways without intense adult intervention. Though Lareau finds strengths and weaknesses in both childrearing logics, schools and other institutions value the interactional styles of the middle-class families. Thus, in interactions with schools and doctors, for example, middle-class students tend to demand and receive higher quality and more customized treatment.

Thus, this is a clear case in which middle-class families are able to deploy cultural capital to the benefit of their children. Following up when the children were 21, Lareau (Lareau, 2006b) finds that on average in her sample, the middle-class children graduated from college, the working-class children graduated from high school but did not attend college, while the poor children did not graduate from high school. Perhaps the outcomes were predictable when the students were in 5th grade, but what happened during high school to sort students into different life paths? Lareau noted (Lareau, 2006a) that

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<sup>4</sup> Lareau studied black and white families, but found that class mattered much more than race in determining parents’ childrearing strategies.

parents' ability to transmit their advantages to their children seemed to increase as the children got older, and called for researchers to take seriously the role of parents' social position and institutional knowledge in shaping the college enrollment process.

There is clear need for such work. Drawing on pilot interviews with families who purchased SAT tutoring for their 11th grade children (Devine-Eller, 2007), I argue that SAT tutoring can be seen as an instance of the transfer of parents' economic capital to children's cultural capital, or more precisely, as an example of middle-class parents' concerted cultivation of their children's skills and opportunities. I find striking support for Lareau's theory in the level of involvement and childrearing logics used by these middle-class families. I also extend the theory in two ways. First, I emphasize that the transfer of cultural capital is not perfect; my small sample includes enough variation to raise questions about the seamlessness of any reproduction of class status. Second, I emphasize the role students themselves play in their own cultivation. Far from being empty vessels directed by their parents, I find that students are highly influential in cultivating their own activities, interests, and talents. While the pilot study confirms that parents of high social status can provide benefits for their children, it opens up more questions than it answers: What is the daily experience of a student preparing for life after high school? What, exactly, is going on in families as students begin to move out of high school and (often) their parents' homes? Mitchell, Armstrong, and Arum identify this as a fruitful direction for new empirical research in the sociology of education subfield (2006). Is this a moment at which the intergenerational transmission of privilege occurs? How do students as social actors negotiate social and cultural institutions, and what does that mean for possibilities of agency?

*Reproduction in the college-for-all era.* As critics have pointed out, the legitimization function of education leaves little hope or space for transformation, resistance, or disruption of the class structure (Dei, 1997; Giroux, 1981). Giroux argues that “[w]hat we are left with is a theoretical posture reinforcing the notion that there is little educators can do to change [students’] ... plight. In short, not only do contradictions and tensions disappear in this account but the promise of critical pedagogy and social change disappears too” (1981:7). This traditional perspective leads to the conclusion that, by erecting the façade of objectivity and equity, “the school abrogates its duty of encouraging all students to succeed by refusing to recognize that the difficulties some students face are the direct result of lacking valued cultural capital and social knowledge” (Dei, 1997).

But these critiques make a lot more sense in an earlier era in which counselors actually did act as gatekeepers (Clark, 1960; Erickson and Shultz, 1982). In today’s college-for-all ethos, the school explicitly encourages all students toward upward mobility and post-secondary education. And while the school does not fully address or remediate the “difficulties some students face”, teachers and counselors do know about and often talk about unequal backgrounds and home lives of their students which hinder academic success. In some cases, they go to extraordinary lengths to try to overcome those obstacles, and sometimes they succeed. In earlier times, schools might have provided a façade of equality which was insufficient for pulling disadvantaged students out of poverty. Among New Jersey counselors and at NJHS, I observed something different: a façade of engaging with inequality, of explicitly fostering equal opportunity.

This strategy was sometimes effective for sending disadvantaged students on to higher education. But when it wasn't enough – and it often wasn't enough – the discourse then turned the blame back to the students for not taking advantage of all the help they were offered. More than that, this method left most regular students floundering at some point as they tried to figure out where, exactly, they fit in the hierarchy of the school and what that meant for their post-secondary futures.

### *Theorizing Everyday Life*

My project contributes to sociological and anthropological debates about structure and agency by showing the complexity of individual decision-making within social and institutional structures. Students' lives – like the lives of any other social actor – are lived within multiple, often conflicting, institutions. Teenagers are subject to the authority of their parents and of the school, and to the judgment of their peers. At the same time they are developing social identities of their own, pushing back against those institutions. Study of teenagers can thus tell us a great deal about the mutually constitutive nature of structure and agency (Giddens, 1979; Ortner, 2006). My dissertation interrogates in what ways students' actions and decisions are bound by the institutions they live in; in what ways they are successful at striking out in new directions; and how structural constraints both limit options and produce opportunities for individual action.

Though much education research in sociology falls under the paradigm of reproduction theory, this theory runs the risk of characterizing students as empty vessels

bearing the cultural capital of their parents, rather than as engaged social actors themselves. I see practice theories (Ortner, 1989; 2001) as a useful way to theorize the mutually constitutive nature of agency and structure, helping us acknowledge the mechanisms of class reproduction through institutional structures at the same time we recognize the autonomy of individuals. To Ortner, practice theories are those that recognize that agency and structure are mutually constituted, that structure “is doubly practiced: it is both lived in, in the sense of being a public world of ordered forms, and embodied, in the sense of being an enduring framework of dispositions that are stamped on actors’ beings” (1989). In other words, structures (or institutions) both constrain our actions and constitute our habitual patterns of interactions. Ortner thus includes as practice theorists not only herself but also Bourdieu (with his concern for ‘structured structures’ and ‘structuring structures’ and habitus, and Giddens with his structuration theory (1979). All these theorists emphasize the duality of structure. For Giddens, this means recognizing “the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices” (1979:5). Practice theory is thus an umbrella term for theorists who emphasize the duality of structure – that structures (or institutions) both constrain our actions and constitute our habitual patterns of interactions (Bourdieu, 1977 [1972]; de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1979; Ortner, 2006).

There is ample room here to theorize the complex relationships students, especially, have with their parents and schools. Lareau notes (2006b) that parents’ ability to transmit advantages to their children seemed to *increase* as the children got older, and calls for researchers to take seriously the role of parents’ social position and institutional



knowledge in shaping the college enrollment process. While this may be true, at the same time, teenagers take on increasing autonomy and begin to develop their own social networks. I examine students' roles in cultivating themselves and negotiating the expectations of parents, peers, and schools. It is also worth noting that in the lives of teens, *all* interactions take place in extremely short time periods. The longest block of time at NJHS is a 42 minute class period, so even a 2 or 3 minute conversation about post-secondary planning can loom quite large in the scheme of things. The practice theory perspective also allows us to take seriously Willis' claim that social reproduction is always an open question. For example, though it is clear they are constrained in their possibilities by their parents' desires and identities, it is important to recognize the roles students take in directing their own lives and producing outcomes on their own – not always the outcomes their parents, or their teachers, intend.

*Structure and agency in the teenage years.* Teens, like all of us, live our lives constrained and enabled by the structures of our institutions. But teens are different in a key way too, because they are somewhere in between childhood and adulthood, and live in a very complex space in which it's rarely clear exactly how much control they have over their own actions and decisions. Sometimes we expect them to "act adult" and "take responsibility" for their decisions; other times we disallow them such autonomy and control the parameters to such an extent that their decisions are almost meaningless. Teens are subject to the control of their schools, their parents, and their peers (Gaines, 1991; Hirschfield, 2010; Kenny, 2000; Monahan and Torres, 2010; Pascoe, 2007). All of

this is layered on top of the media pressures they constantly face (distracted), and the physiological and emotional turbulences of puberty.

Add to this complexity the fact that teens spend about eight hours a day – maybe half their waking hours – in the school building, subject to the control of their time, bodies, and often their minds. Counselors and teachers, working within the structural constraints of district rules and cultural ideals, do shape some students' pathways. Reproduction is not happenstance or pre-ordained like a machine; rather school officials invest in some students, allow turning points to happen or be missed, and affect how teens choose to respond. Teens, in turn, make choices – to have a job or not, to study or not, to apply to college or not – and these choices impact how the school responds to them and how prepared they are for their post-secondary transition.

*Gatekeeping.* Practice theory is also a useful way of exploring the function of gatekeeping mechanisms. A gate-keeping mechanism, such as college admissions, functions as a filter that allows some people to achieve desired social benefits while shutting others out. The imagery of the term implies that gate-keeping occurs at a singular moment in time, presumably in this case at the moment a college makes an admissions decision about a student. While there may be a fateful moment at which a student makes a life decision – mailing in the acceptance letter to one college instead of another, for example – I find that the major turning points often occur much more subtly and over a longer period of time. Even admissions decisions, for example, rely on applications that often reflect a lifetime of preparation (Stevens, 2007). In addition, for many students, admissions decisions do not constitute the crucial moment, but are

secondary to financial considerations (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). Decisions unfold in everyday life as students negotiate institutional and social structures. Students, even those who have those fateful moments, almost all feel that things “just happened” to them. In retrospect, students often claim that they “always knew” things would work out as they did, even when things were never that clear moving forward. It is only by paying attention to students’ daily lives over time that we can explore these longer-term dynamics of gatekeeping mechanisms.

### *The Logic of the Data*

In the chapters that follow, I draw on several data sources to make my argument. Here, I describe the data briefly; see Chapter 6 (Methodological Appendix) for a more comprehensive discussion. Chronologically, I began by interviewing more than two dozen high school guidance counselors in New Jersey. In these interviews, I asked counselors about how the engaged students in post-secondary planning. Counseling is an important part of the school experience for students, but it is easy to overestimate its importance. It is likely that students do not think counselors are as important as counselors think they are. Thus, the study of counselors helps me understand the institutional context of schools, and provides an alternative perspective from which to view students’ lives.

The bulk of the research was performed at a school I call New Jersey High School (NJHS), a racially and socioeconomically diverse school in central New Jersey with

diverse post-secondary outcomes. I spent most of my time from September 2008 until June 2010 either at the school or writing field notes<sup>5</sup>. I shadowed students through their school days, interviewed them and their teachers and their parents; attended school activities; and went on community tours with students. Drawing on interviews with parents and teachers as well as the ethnographic data from students allows me to triangulate the contexts of students' paths and to analyze those paths in a more sophisticated way that reflects the complexity of real life, as well as ensures the internal validity of my findings. While I selected a group of 17 focal students to follow (see Appendix B for a brief description of each), they gave me access to the school culture as a whole and to a very wide selection of classrooms at NJHS. So indeed much of my analysis in the text to follow does not focus on the 17 focal students, but instead attempts to describe the daily life patterns of students in one particular institutional context as they plan for life after high school. In part, this is an attempt to step slightly outside the norm in educational sociology of tracking individual-level data through school and inter-school transitions (Stevens, 4/25/2007).

New Jersey is not only a convenient state in which to conduct this research; it is also theoretically important. New Jersey ranks at the top of states in high school

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<sup>5</sup> Timing is an important part of the transition process. For students with college aspirations, there is a crucial 18-month period between the fall of the junior year of high school and the spring of the senior year during which college planning takes place. This is a period of intense activity on the part of students, parents, and counselors. It is intensified by the feeling that actions and inactions during this period will determine the life course of students (and, of course, in many ways this is true, to the extent that life chances are linked to high school and college completion). I take this rather well-bounded period as the basis of my study, recognizing that this means applying the standard of college-bound students to the entire sample.

graduation rates, college preparation, and percentage of students intending to go to college. This makes the question of which students do not attend college, and why they do not, even more salient here. New Jersey has the 2nd highest graduation rate in the nation, 82.5% compared to the national average of 69.9%<sup>6</sup> (EPE Research Center, 2007b). The state consistently ranks well in preparing students for college, and the chance of students enrolling in college by age 19 is 53%, one of the top state scores (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006b). But the state also has a large race gap, with whites twice as likely as non-whites to enroll in college, and those “from high-income families are more than twice as likely as those from low-income families to attend college – one of the widest gaps in the nation”(The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006b). Moreover, both the income and the race gap are widening, and higher education is becoming increasingly less affordable. The state, therefore, can be seen as a case study of the larger national trends.

*So What?*

It should be reasonably clear, at this point, why I think the study matters. But I will lay it out as explicitly as I can. As the U.S. income distribution bifurcates and mobility stagnates (Scott and Leonhardt, 2005), having that college degree becomes

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<sup>6</sup> Graduation rates are notoriously difficult to measure, and reported rates can vary by as much as 40 percentage points depending on the method of calculation. For example, some graduation rates are calculated by dividing the number of seniors who graduate by the total number of seniors; this fails to count students who left school in earlier years.

increasingly consequential. The impact on students' lives is immediate and direct. When a student chooses, is pushed, or falls into a two-year college instead of a four-year college, his or her chances of ever completing a degree fall, and thus do the chances of attaining a middle-class income. One central takeaway of my research is that what counselors and schools do matters; they set up the expectations and the structure in which teens make post-secondary decisions. Intervening on behalf of a student can change that student's life in unanticipated ways, and even what seems a tiny amount of support or advice can mean a lot to a student. If schools can change things for students, then schools can also do better by evaluating what they are doing and whether it can improve. I believe we've got a long way to go, but I am optimistic that even relatively minor changes will make a dramatic impact. I write about some of them in Chapter 5.

### *Chapter Overview*

This dissertation began with the puzzle of two students, Toby and Ken, who help me think about the ways in which pathways out of high school are normalized or problematized, about which post-secondary goals become default or easy for which sorts of students, about how we can best help teens plan their lives. In this first chapter, I have explored the relevant sociological literature and described the importance of my findings. I argue that teens face a complex paradox as they leave high school: in the college-for-all era, they are expected to go to college, and college is necessary for mobility into the middle class. And yet less than half of them will go to four-year colleges, and only about

half of those will finish Bachelor's degrees. And many of them, even those without degrees, will leave school with crushing debt and a dearth of jobs. Somehow they have to figure out how to navigate through; the rest of this dissertation explores the school context in which they navigate.

In Chapter Two, I describe the counseling context in which post-secondary decisions get made. Drawing on interviews with high school guidance counselors around New Jersey, I note the “scaffolding paradox” that results in counselors who do the most on behalf of their students feeling as if they do the least, and vice versa. I argue that two ideal-types of counselors – those at high-college-sending and those at low-college-sending high schools – structure post-secondary planning along different timelines, which impacts the ultimate success of the planning. Longer, more complex timelines allow counselors to scaffold students along the planning process and provide time to check in with stragglers.

In Chapter Three, we leap in to New Jersey High School. I show how the institutional structure of the school develops a mixed message about students' post-secondary futures. Explicitly, the school tells students that college is for everyone; implicitly, it undermines the college plans of some students and redirects them away from successful four-year-college planning.

Chapter Four explores how NJHS students receive the messages sent by their school, and how they sort and place themselves in relation to their peers and their post-secondary futures. I argue that students face great challenges in this process because they hear the message that everyone can go to college, and yet they see that this is not true in

real life. They have to figure out how to talk about status ranking when no adults will tell them what status ranking is allowed.

Chapter Five returns to explore the pathways of Ken and Toby, drawing out the theoretical implications from earlier chapters and showing how these threads appear in their lives and what impact they have. I outline the contributions of this study to the sociological literature, and then make policy recommendations that could help counselors and schools be more explicit about their goals for every student, and more successful in accomplishing them.

Finally, in Chapter 6 (Methodological Appendix), I discuss in detail where my data come from and how I got them. I also discuss some of the (many!) methodological concerns and some of the (many!) ethical questions that I faced in working with teens in a school setting.



## Chapter 2: We do everything for them, but they do it on their own

### COUNSELING AND THE POST-SECONDARY PLANNING PROCESS

The timing, duration, and sequence of the college application process are critical. Students typically must lay the groundwork for a college-track transcript starting in 9<sup>th</sup> grade (or earlier); standardized tests must be taken within a particular window; applications for admission and financial aid must be submitted on time. Students who miss any of these critical events face tremendous disadvantage in their attempts to move on to higher education. High school counselors are often the ones who communicate these timelines and deadlines to students and their families. They often play a key (albeit unevenly-distributed) role in helping students transition to higher education, and lay the school's groundwork for basic preparation for desired outcomes (Becker and Stephan, 2011; Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Jones, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Shamah and MacTavish, 2008; Stevens, 2007; Valadez, 2008).

For all students, counselors hold the power of scheduling, which often determines a student's academic track (formal or informal) and thus whether the student has the necessary credits for application to four-year colleges. Counselors also control the application process because they are responsible for sending out required transcripts and counselor recommendations. A counselor who fails to mail a transcript can sink an application, regardless of intention. Additionally, counselors are key sources of college information, especially to students who are first-generation college-going, but also to

eldest children in general. Good counselors relay how the application process works and on what timeline; what a student's reasonable expectations of admission are and what colleges may be a good match; how the high school experiences (such as academic track and GPA) align with the college application process; and how to successfully navigate the process. Students with college-experienced families may be able to glean this information elsewhere, but even for them counselors can act as invaluable resources as they plan for college.

Nevertheless, a recent survey found that most students give their counselors poor or fair ratings (Johnson and Rochkind, 2010), and a national survey of counselors calls them “among the least strategically deployed” professionals in our education system (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011). Counselors and schools are largely unable to track the actual post-secondary outcomes of their own students (and to evaluate their own college-guidance efficacy). For example, in New Jersey like most other states, no one knows how many students transfer from two-year to four-year schools (or vice versa, the so-called “reverse transfer”); which students report that they will attend but then never show up; or which students drop out.

Despite the important role of the counselor in shepherding students through their transition out of high school, there is little research on how counselors see their own role and how they manage the yearly cycle and the daily challenges of counseling. We know little about the variation in actual counseling practices that might contribute to inequality in counseling (and thus in post-secondary outcomes). I argue in this chapter that some counselors approach their job *pedagogically*: that is, they understand themselves as

educators who help students navigate their own ways. I argue that such counselors use the pedagogical strategy of *scaffolding*.

Scaffolding is an instructional technique that allows the learner to accomplish a more difficult task than would be possible alone. It requires the teacher to provide temporary supports to help the learner acquire skills or knowledge, and then take away those supports once the learner is capable of the tasks on their own. Scaffolding theory, as used in education today, is based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the "zone of proximal development", the range of tasks that are impossible for a learner alone but possible with help. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) argue that the process "may result, eventually, in development of task competence by the learner at a pace that would far outstrip [their] unassisted efforts". I argue that scaffolding can make it seem – to both the teacher and the learner! – that the learner is accomplishing tasks independently. Yet the teacher must construct the scaffold for the learner to climb, which requires intense attention to the abilities and knowledge of the learner. Scaffolding features the *appearance* of independence, and eventually allows *actual* independence. Thus, scaffolding can be seen as intrinsically paradoxical. As I show in this chapter, counselors who do the most for their students actually seem to do the least, and vice versa.

Planning one's post-secondary future is a logistically and emotionally challenging task, dependent upon large amounts of knowledge, which has incredible importance for the shape of one's future occupational and economic life. It is, arguably, too difficult for teenagers to undertake on their own. Counselors (and parents) can scaffold students through decision-making processes about their academic preparation, their wishes for the

future, what sorts of post-secondary education or training makes sense, the process of applying to those schools, and so forth.

Counselors scaffold with varying levels of success and skill. Throughout this chapter, I will show that counselors who scaffold are those whose schools send a majority of students to four-year colleges; I call these schools “high-college-sending” schools. In contrast, counselors at “low-college-sending” schools do not scaffold, and send under half of their students to four-year colleges<sup>7</sup>. These ideal types emerged from the data, which draws on interviews with 28 randomly-sampled counselors in New Jersey high schools and on publicly available school-level data on student outcomes<sup>8</sup>.

As I will show in this chapter, one of the major ways counselors at high-college-sending schools successfully scaffold is by strategically managing a complex and extended planning timeline. Each counseling office has a calendar that structures daily, monthly, and yearly activities in the school – for example, the office might schedule a family college planning night in November, and meet with sophomores for scheduling classes starting March 1. Despite the clear importance of timing in the guidance calendar, there is little research on how counseling calendars are developed and implemented, and what effects they have on student outcomes (though see Allensworth et al., 2008).

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<sup>7</sup> As with my caveat about school professionals in general, I must make a caveat for counselors. Counselors are – almost universally – dedicated, compassionate professionals who care deeply about their students. They lament their hours spent on administering tests and shuffling papers rather than direct contact with students. But they also have little standardized training in post-secondary counseling, and often no training or education about the success rates of their own students or national data on completion. My analytical focus, thus, highlights their weaknesses. I beg their forgiveness.

<sup>8</sup> I use data from the 2007 seniors, as this is the last graduating class before I interviewed counselors in 2008. See Chapter 6 (Methodological Appendix) for details.

Analyzing the distinct planning timelines employed by counselors at these two ideal-type schools is thus a major contribution of this chapter.

I argue that how counselors think about their college planning calendar reflects how they think about their students and how they think about their roles in the college process: that is, the calendars reflect the broad pedagogical approach taken by the counseling office and which structures underlying regular and periodic activities in the school (Becker, 2011). Though McDonough (1997) reports wide variation in access to college information for students at different types of school, I find that counselors share the same basic sequence for ushering students out of high school and into college: imagine a future career, explore colleges, prepare for the SAT, write the application, and solicit letters of recommendation. Schools differ, however, in the ways counselors manage the timing and duration of this timeline. High-college-sending schools strategically negotiate a *complex* and *extended* timeline that helps them provide individualized planning for their students. This results in effective expectation management and success in the college application process. In contrast, low-college-sending schools manage a *simplified* and *condensed* timeline that results in misaligned expectations (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999) and students falling through the cracks. By the senior year – when many such schools start the college application process – much of the preparation sequence is moot: students do not have the opportunity to make up missing credits required by colleges, they have little time to prepare for entrance exams or visit colleges for “fit”, and they are already late in crafting essays that are likely to gain them admission to prestigious colleges. The disadvantage facing students at low-college-sending schools, who also are more likely to be poor and minority, is thus compounded

by a delayed and hasty (if not misdirected) college preparation process. Even high-achieving students might not have the required course sequences, and they have little time to prepare for entrance exams or visit colleges.

Of course, schools with wealthier, more educated families are more likely to send their kids to four-year college, and more likely to have the resources and networks to do so, and more likely to demand help with the process from their schools or from private consultants. Earlier preparation helps students, but is also (as counselors lament) demanded by those most likely to attend four-year colleges. Among my sample, rates of four-year college-going are inversely correlated with the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Such correlations might be seen as an indication that schools that send a high percentage of students to four-year colleges are not so much providing any added value as reflecting their student population. (Or, on the contrary, schools with low four-year college-going rates are not *failing* but simply reflecting their student population.) However, outliers with both high four-year college-going rates and substantial free and reduced price lunch rates (such as Public-A, 86% and 14%, respectively; and Public-D, 77% and 10%, respectively) indicate that there are things schools do that impact student post-secondary outcomes. I argue in this chapter that different approaches to counseling, facilitated by different approaches to the counseling calendar, enable or disable effective college counseling. Namely, a pedagogical role conception that approaches counseling as a scaffolding task, which is facilitated by a complex and extended planning timeline, results in high rates of four-year college-going. I argue that the college-planning calendar is important independently in its effects on

student post-secondary outcomes, *and* as a frame for understanding how schools envision and carry out their role vis-à-vis college planning.

Soft policy on guidance counselor roles is set in a number of ways, with a high degree of flexibility from school to school. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) provides curricular support for counselors and publications intended for students; these publications include a “College Planning Checklist” which suggests an ideal timeline for students (and thus for counselors) (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008). State organizations, such as the New Jersey Association for College Admission Counseling (NJACAC), provide similar timelines in their resources. I show a typical college-planning timeline in Appendix C. But these are recommendations rather than requirements, and the actual guidance calendar is typically set by guidance directors in individual schools, and implemented with varying fidelity by individual counselors. There are thus significant differences in the college planning experience of students at different schools which directly impact the likelihood of students attending college, and which college. The differences I find are all the more striking considering that there is a strong incentive for counselors to 1) enact, and 2) describe in interviews their conformity to college-for-all goals. Given these demand characteristics, one would expect the differences between schools to be subtle, and for actual differences in college-planning processes to vary more than counselors’ descriptions of those processes. I consider the evidence I present here, then, to be a conservative estimate of differences.

Counselors who send a majority of their students on to four-year colleges *scaffold* their daily interactions with students, providing extensive support as students make their

college plans. When scaffolding works, counselors facilitate students' college planning while downplaying how much they do on behalf of the students. When scaffolding does not take place or is not successful, counselors feel they do too much for students and students do not listen. Scaffolding also facilitates sophisticated, nuanced conversations between counselor and students, enabling students to make post-secondary choices that are more likely to be successful.

*A Note on "Successful Post-Secondary Planning".*

Talking about what successful high school counselors do is tricky because it so quickly gets caught up in normative evaluations of what they *ought* to do and what outcomes they *ought* to be seeking. It is often assumed that the goal is to send all students on to 4-year colleges, so "successful" counselors are the ones who do this. It is my wish, nodding towards the critical research by Rosenbaum and his collaborators, not to make such a normative claim. Another way of evaluating successful counseling might be to gauge whether counselors meet their own goals; but since most counselors also believe in college-for-all, this is hardly different in practice. In this chapter, I try to stick to descriptive statements of whether counselors are meeting those goals, without intending to imply normative judgment about whether the goals are warranted.

## HIGH-COLLEGE-SENDING AND LOW-COLLEGE-SENDING HIGH SCHOOLS



Thematic analysis of transcripts revealed that counselors employ different strategies for managing the college admissions process. I find the schools separate into two distinct ideal-types: “high-college-sending” (those with 60% or more students heading to four-year colleges or universities) and “low-college-sending” (those with under 50% heading to four-year colleges or universities)<sup>9</sup>.

High-college-sending schools are Public-A through Public-Q<sup>10</sup>. They are characterized by a high degree of individualized attention to students, detailed tracking of college applications, one-on-one family meetings, evening programs, and financial resources for things such as software and mailings. Counselors at these schools successfully employ scaffolding in their interactions with students: that is, they approach college planning as a learning process during which they give increasing responsibility to students, shepherding them through decision-making processes over a period of time. Low-college-sending schools, Public-R through Public-X (plus Public-P), are characterized by a lack of one-on-one post-secondary planning with juniors; no family meetings; postponing of college information and discussion until 12<sup>th</sup> grade; less and less-accurate tracking of college applications, provision of more clinical and social

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<sup>9</sup> The percentage split is partly a sampling artifact; I happen to have sampled no schools with four-year college-going rates between 50% and 60%, though such schools do exist in New Jersey. Data limitations thus prevent me from claiming a more precise split than somewhere in that decile. This seems to have some face validity as well: something different is going on at schools where the majority of the students are going on to four-year colleges.

<sup>10</sup> Except Public-P, which functions like a low-college-sending school. In fact, while all schools show some year-to-year variation in post-secondary outcomes, Public-P shows a nearly 25% increase in four-year college-going from 2006 to 2007. In 2010, the rate is back down near 40%. Whether this is an error in the state data or due to some real but temporary fluctuation, Public-P is more accurately categorized as a low-college-sending school.

services, and the presence of on-site county college (two-year) placement programs. I characterize Public-Y and Public-Z as failing schools, because in addition to their extremely low four-year college-going rates, they enact policies that harm students' chances of attending college and that mislead students about those chances.

As I will show below, there are important differences in the processes used by each type of school. A key difference between the two ideal types of schools is the ways in which the *timeline* of events occurs. The counseling calendar at use in a school impacts how college planning unfolds and how successful it can be. High-college-sending schools strategically negotiate an extended, complex timeline; low-college-sending schools implement a shorter, simplified timeline. These different calendars impact the ability of the school to provide individualized attention and follow-up, and thus impact student outcomes and the management of student expectations. High-college-sending schools manage the expectations of their students better, have fewer students falling through the cracks, and send more students to four-year colleges.

#### SCAFFOLDING OF DAILY INTERACTIONS

Counselors talk with students, fill out paperwork, make contacts, give advice, and generally help students with the pragmatic aspects of applying for college. When this process works smoothly, counselors guide students to develop realistic goals, students prepare applications and send them in on time, and everyone is happy with the outcomes. When it works poorly, counselors are frustrated with lack of interest or effort by students,

students feel unsupported or lost and develop unrealistic goals or fail to meet deadlines, and everyone is unhappy with the results.

I argue that when this process works well, counselors conceive of their role as one of *scaffolding*. Scaffolding arises, most concretely, in the daily interactions counselors have with students. Scaffolding is an educational process by which the instructor provides support for the student to incrementally increase their knowledge or skills, gradually removing those supports as the student becomes more competent until the student is autonomous (Wood et al., 1976). Scaffolding, in the sense I use it, has resonances with Lareau's concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003): adults make things possible for kids, providing the illusion of children's independence and facilitating the children's interactions with key institutions. Scaffolding facilitates a kind of *dependent independence*, what many non-scaffolding counselors disdainfully call handholding: successful students feel like they have completed the whole process on their own, when in fact they were significantly supported by their counselors (or families).

A very common instance of scaffolding is the process by which counselors help students come up with their lists of colleges to apply to:

Public-E: We started working with our students individually back in December, our juniors [...] to sit down with them and begin to narrow their focus in what they're looking for in a college. From a geographic standpoint. From the size of the college. From, distance from home, the surrounding environment. We've been working with them teaching them how to do online college search programs. [...] How to navigate that for themselves. How to manipulate different values, do different searches. And they could also bring it home and sit down with their parents, and do the same thing. [...] Another thing that we go about doing, is we, our school generates, a list from the seniors before of their GPA, SAT scores. All the relevant statistics related to the admissions process. And students are able to see, were those students accepted or rejected? Because [...] you also have students who have those goals, and they may be a little bit out of line from where they stand as a student. [...] So we use tools like that to present them with information, so they're able to glean it on their own. So I think,

you know, part of what we try to do, is just, is be that resource. That resource that supplies them with everything that they need, or a way to find it. So that they can take advantage of it.

Note how the counselor develops a framework to teach the student about the parameters of the college search, how to execute that college search, how to navigate a database, how to evaluate different criteria, and how to compare themselves with other students to assess their realistic opportunities. The counselor thus sets up a framework in which students can successfully navigate the college admissions process, while feeling as if they have done all the work “on their own”: they carry out the steps of a highly choreographed process.

Scaffolding appears not just in the daily interactions between counselors and students, but also in the way counselors plan out their counseling schedule across the year (a point to which I return in detail below). The counselor at Public-H, for example, describes how successful college planning requires an iterative series of discussions:

Public-H: And then they have the entire spring of junior year to do the research. They have the summer. And then they come back and we meet with them again when they come back and start working with them individually. So hopefully by that time they’ve done some research, and they do have some preliminary thoughts on what they’re looking for. And they’re a little more familiar with uh some of the jargon. They’ve visited some campuses, so now we can speak on a different level. And start with the decision process.

The counselor thus sets up a pedagogical process that introduces students to some of the “jargon” and parameters of the college search process, sends them out to do some work on their own, and then revisits their college planning in a more detailed way.

In contrast, counselors at low-college-sending schools do not and think they cannot scaffold. They feel pressured by time constraints and see “handholding” as outside the realm of possibility:

Public-R: But these students think that we're gonna help them every step of the way. It's unrealistic [...]. I would love to hold their hand and be nurturing but we're not in that position to do that. [...]It's difficult to grab every single student, go over every single thing.

The ramifications of *not* “handholding” is that students are ill-prepared to make reasonable post-secondary choices. Of course, such counselors face uphill battles against lack of resources, time, and support. In many cases, they would be required to stay late and spend their own money to support students in a way they would prefer<sup>11</sup>.

### *Erasing the Work*

Scaffolding requires significant investment of time and energy from counselors and a lot of individualized attention and follow-up. But as with the scaffolding on a construction site, the best scaffolding paradoxically makes itself disappear. Students themselves are often unaware of the help they are getting along the way; scaffolding is largely invisible to them, so that they metaphorically climb a steep and difficult route while believing they are doing it on their own. This legitimizes social reproduction in a way complementary to what Khan (2011) describes among elite prep school students: the school is structured so as to make them believe they are completing arduous intellectual training, when in fact they do not work very hard at their academics.

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<sup>11</sup> Many counselors do this, but basing educational reform on the necessity for extraordinary school professionals (like Jaime Escalante, as exemplified in the 1988 film *Stand and Deliver*, or the many similar films since) is not a sustainable or, arguable, admirable practice. School practices, and school reform, have got to work with regular people.

But scaffolding is not only invisible to the students: counselors, too, actively work to highlight student effort and erase their own involvement in scaffolding, which serves to enhance the illusion that students are working independently. An example is provided by the counselor at Public-A, describing how she helped a student fill out financial aid forms:

Public-A: With the FAFSA I didn't actually do it. They sat in the seat. I sat next to them, just kind of like 'Good job, good job'. I'd walk out and do something, you know, check in on them. [...] You know it's nice to have an adult sitting with you and prepping you. [...] And so that's really the message, to be a role model for them. And to be that support for them.

Note how the counselor simultaneously describes building a scaffold for the student (having them come in to her office to fill out a financial aid form, overseeing the process, providing confidence and emotional support) and erases her own participation in the process by claiming she 'didn't actually do' anything.

### *Counselors' Subjective Experience of Scaffolding*

The flip side to the scaffolding paradox is that *not* scaffolding can feel like a momentous job that is completely wasted. Paradoxically, in their interviews, the less counselors describe *actually doing*, the more they *say* they do. Low-college-sending counselors tend to complain about the amount of individualized attention students expect from them, yet they actually provide much less guidance and help to their students. I argue that this is a side-effect of how they conceptualize their jobs. Counselors who scaffold have a very different understanding of what their role ought to be from counselors who do not. They systematically build up supports for students which they

also systematically make invisible in order to foster *dependent independence*. High-college-sending counselors tend to describe extensive individualized attention and handholding of students, but in terms that make it clear this is simply what they think their job is, and in a way that makes students themselves feel independent and accomplished. They describe the college-planning process in terms that indicate they understand the emotional and pragmatic aspects of the process. It is because of this that, while downplaying their own involvement, they describe *actually doing more* for their students. For example, the counselor at Public-A simultaneously describes a high level of outreach to families while claiming the school does nothing:

Public-A: We see sophomores right around, they take the PSATs in October. We don't do any talking about that actually for sophomores. We send a letter home to families. It's available to you. You don't have to, but it's an option. It's Saturday it's not during school.

ADE: How many of them take it?

Public-A: I would say 50 to 60% take it now. And that's without any sort of our getting involved.

This counselor says that the school doesn't do "*any talking*" about sophomores taking the PSATs, that the school does not get involved in any way, but then explains that the school meets with sophomores and sends a letter home to each 10<sup>th</sup> grade family (which by most standards is actually a pretty high level of involvement).

Scaffolding counselors deny the work they do because they see this work as a normal part of their job and as supporting a normal developmental stage for their students. This position is bolstered by the fact that scaffolding intrinsically erases the work of the counselor. The counselor at Private-A illustrates both how mundane and how exceptional this involvement is:

Private-A: I tell students, "You can treat my office as a home." There are always a couple of kids who are nervous about hitting the submit button on an application, it's

just a scary moment [...] I'll keep them company while they hit the submit button because they just feel better if they have a witness you know? It's funny. This is, by any account, a high level of handholding, and yet the counselor at Private-A finds it amusing and endearing, rather than annoying.

In contrast, counselors who do not scaffold – those at low-college-sending schools – talk about a relationship with the student in which the counselor does the bulk of the college planning work, and they often lament how lazy and unmotivated the students are. For example, at Public-U:

Public-U: We practically spoon feed them every step of the way [...] to the point where we just about fill out the applications with them. This counselor sees filling out applications with students as outside the scope of the job or time available. Counselors at low-college-sending schools do not set up the building blocks for students which foster the appearance of independence that students have at high-college-sending schools. Thus it *feels* to counselors that they are doing more work for their students, and often that this work is not getting through or accomplishing much. In contrast, counselors at high-college-sending schools describe *actually* filling out applications with their students, or *actually* filling out financial aid forms with or for parents. But because scaffolding fosters the appearance of independence, high-college-sending counselors take this work in stride as part of their normal daily activities.

### *Successful Scaffolding Allows Sophisticated Discourse*

Counselors vary in the amount of information they know about college admissions, the accuracy of that information, and in how effectively they implement that



information in their practice and communicate it to students and parents. Counseling certification rarely includes any formal training in college admissions; it's something counselors have to pick up along the way. This leads to tremendous variation in knowledge overall, including how much a counselor knows about the local colleges. Colleges often offer informational outreach programs to counselors – for example, a representative will attend a county-based counselor association's monthly meeting, or the college will participate in a multi-day, multi-college counselor field trip. On such trips, counselors visit a dozen or so colleges in a geographical region over the course of 3 or 4 days, paid for by the colleges. Some schools allow counselors to attend these as normal work days; others do not. Some schools have sophisticated software such as Naviance (see below) that helps counselors research colleges and track the success rates over time of their students in applying to individual colleges (Becker and Stephan, 2011 show the various ways counselors use such software); others have a hard time keeping track of where students apply. Students who have access to knowledgeable counselors are clearly at an advantage. That advantage is multiplied when counselors are skillful at deploying that information.

In this section, I present two extended interview excerpts which highlight the way in which successful scaffolding allows counselors to engage in sophisticated, nuanced discussions with students and parents (and even me, in our interviews). Counselors at high-college-going schools use more sophisticated language and specialized terminology to describe what they do, what is required of students, and how they help students navigate the college-planning process. They scaffold students' learning of the jargon by providing early college information and directing students to their own research and

visiting colleges; recall the counselor at Public-H, quoted above, that once students have learned the jargon they can speak at a different level. This facilitates much more individualized counseling because counselors, parents, and students are able to talk in a specialized jargon about the college-planning process and about the students' goals. This increases the effectiveness with which counselors deploy information and resources to students and parents.

At this end of this spectrum is the counselor at Private-A. Here is how she talked about helping her students decide where to apply:

Private-A: I see how they compose the rest of their list as a kind of function of their emotional relationship to risk. Rather than a direct function of their academic record. I could show you in every class, two kids whose academic records if you lay them on top of each other would map almost directly, very similar SAT's, very similar GPA, very similar rigor of curriculum, but their lists could look really different because one kid is not only risk tolerant but risk seeking and is the kind of kid who feels like, I know I'm not gonna get in but I don't care, it's worse for me if I don't try. Not trying will drive me crazy, I'll be fine if I go to Rutgers but I just need to apply to Georgetown, Duke, Penn and Yale. And we have kids like that. And then we have kids who are not only not risk tolerant, they're risk averse, and I'm you know sort of coaxing them to maybe put a reach on their list but they, for them that's not comfortable, and it feels like, 'Why would I want to stick my neck out? Even if I went to those super tough schools, I'd be struggling to keep my little academic nose above water. I'd like to get a bunch of fat envelopes thank you very much, you know?' [...] So if I had a student who was really loading up on schools that were, you know, from my perspective, well out of their academic reach, I would say to them, 'From my perspective, and I hope I'm wrong [t]hese are not good odds. So I want to remind you about the conversation we had about risk and your emotional response, and I want to ask you, what kind of person do you think you are? Because if you really are the kind of person who wants to ride the upside-down rollercoaster, ok, but this is looking like a serious upside-down rollercoaster. Possibly without a seatbelt, you know?' And I'll say that stuff, and then, [...] it's a learning process, they have to learn.

Such discourse assumes that students are academically competent while scaffolding them to competence in assessing their own emotional states. It simultaneously allows a very sophisticated discussion of college planning, because neither the counselor nor the

student is left with only the simple question of ‘can I get in?’ Instead, the counselor encourages the student to engage in a meta-evaluation of the student’s application list: not just which schools am I applying to, but why, and how will I feel about it when I get the decisions? This involves more hand-holding along the way, but in the end makes the student seem much more independent and results in more college-admissions success.

In contrast, low-college-sending counselors engage with their students in less nuanced and less intensive ways. The counselor at Public-P represents the most extreme end of the distribution. She repeatedly referred to her high school students as “little girls”. Even if done in a spirit of compassion or guidance, such discourse infantilizes students and sets up a discourse that assumes students are not capable of developing realistic plans for themselves or following through on such plans, a belief I think this counselor would acknowledge having. This counselor allowed me to stay in her office while she held a scheduling meeting with a 10<sup>th</sup> grader who said she might like to be a math or science teacher but who was failing English and hadn’t yet taken a foreign language. I was not introduced to the student, though I sat in the office with her during the entire meeting. I quote the (recorded) exchange at length here to illustrate some of these analytical points: the simplistic discussion of the student’s future goals, the superficial discussion of the college application process, and the intellectual and emotional infantilizing of the student:

Counselor-P: Okay did you tell me any of your options that you had?

Student: um teacher

C: Oh yeah. What kind of teacher?

S: I want to be a science or math teacher.

C: Right, you did say that. You know you also have those little ones. I kind of picture you with those cute little kids.

S: Yeah I love kids.

C: See I'm thinking K-3 for you. You think that? You can always try. [writing] Math K3. [mumbles] So what do you, stay in school, ok, NJCU, Montclair, Willie P. You know stuff like that, St. Elizabeth's. FDU, do you know that one?

S: Yeah.

C: I think it's a nice school. Now look we are talking big-name schools like that. You know what you have to do

S: [indecipherable]

C: Yeah but do you just walk in there or what happens? Do they make you, what do they make you do first?

S: [Mumbling, indecipherable]

C: They make you take a test what do they call that test?

S: I have no idea.

C: They call it the SAT.

S: You take it here right?

C: That's the HSPA [NJ graduation test]. I'm gonna give you some paperwork and I'm writing down here that we had a discussion about it so you understand what you have to do and you can't just walk in cold and say here I am. You've gotta prepare for it. I'm gonna give you something. Sign your name there, poo-poo. Okay, I'll make a copy of that. I'll give you the paperwork and then you're rolling, you are rolling. [goes out to copy]

ADE: It's awesome you like math and science

S: I like, I don't know. I have a lot. I just I wanna be a teacher. I love doing hair. That's just one of the majors I really wanna do but it depends because I don't know which one makes more than. I wanna enjoy it not go half-and-half but I think I could do both like be a teacher half time for school and then I could do hair like part-time too like half-and-half.

ADE: That would be awesome.

S: Mm-hm. I love children. I wanted to be like a day care [indecipherable] too I think that would be nice.

Counselor: [returning] Alright here's this book that you take a look at, here's a book that tells you all the schools in New Jersey. You take a look at this. Here's a copy for you scheduled for next year and here's a copy for me. OK kid? See you later.

That marked the end of the meeting, with the counselor handing the student her 11<sup>th</sup> grade schedule and a book of New Jersey colleges. Given her academic record, the student's goal of becoming a high school math or science teacher – if that actually was her goal – was unrealistic. The counselor fails to address this directly, substitutes an alternate goal of elementary school teaching, and then throws out a relatively random list

of colleges to which the student might apply. The counselor is asking but not really listening to the student's goals, and she gives simple, perfunctory answers that do not really guide the student or get her on the same page. Indeed, I learned more about the student's post-secondary goals in the brief exchange while the counselor was out of the room. The counselor attempts to scaffold the student's knowledge about admissions testing, but does not sufficiently explain it. Instead, she falls back on handing the student paperwork. This is an example of unsuccessful scaffolding, where the counselor does not take the time to listen to the student's goals, to build up the student's knowledge, or set her on a path that will realistically lead to college.

#### MANAGING THE POST-SECONDARY PLANNING TIMELINE

The college admissions guidance timelines in schools are complex. Some aspects of the timeline are set relatively rigidly by external deadlines. For example, universities often have application deadlines, which in turn require students to complete standardized testing by a particular date. Other aspects are open to flexibility by students and counselors. I find that high-college-sending and low-college-sending schools operate two very different guidance timelines. Though they share the same basic event sequences, they vary systematically in the timing and duration of those events. Importantly, the calendars enable or prevent a successful scaffolding approach to post-secondary planning. Scaffolding is supported and facilitated by the complex, extended timeline employed in high-college-sending schools. For example:

Private-B: I really prefer to see the parents later [than February 11<sup>th</sup> grade, when she sees them now] because it kinda short circuits things. I used to like to bring the kids along more slowly and do more self assessment types of things and and have them reflect a little bit more and have them do some research and do some work before they come to meet with the parents and say, ‘This is what I’ve discovered’. And when I start meeting when the parents demand to come in so early it short-circuits that a little bit cuz they, I don’t know. Having done it both ways I kind of prefer just working with the students alone and tell the parents to hold off. But it’s getting harder and harder to just say [wait].

These counselors approach college planning as a multi-year, pedagogical task. The timeline allows students to do their own research and come to their own conclusions about their likelihood of acceptance, which helps counselors better manage expectations. The calendar thus functions as a real, substantial tool for such counselors. In contrast, the shortened, simplified timeline followed by low-college-sending schools mimics the sequence, timing, and duration but lacks the substance; it functions as an empty signifier that points to college preparation without actually doing the work of college preparation (in a similar way as shown in the extended example from counselor P above: she went through the steps of college planning with her student, without sufficiently addressing the substance behind those steps).

A further example of how, at low-college-sending schools, the calendar functions as an empty signifier is the place of standardized testing in the college planning process. Standardized tests must be taken – specifically, the HSPA (High School Proficiency Assessment, for graduation), and the SAT (for college admissions). Though these tests are critical, counselors at high-college-sending schools view them as technical details: students have to pass the HSPA and their SAT scores will in part determine where they apply to college. But the emphasis is on students finding a good “fit”, and the testing is functionally a bureaucratic formality, secondary to the substantive preparation students

need to do in terms of seeking post-secondary options that fit with their goals, financial situation, and personalities. Counselors at these schools often downplay the importance of testing (for example, congratulating 10<sup>th</sup> graders on *not* taking the PSAT); they often talk about intentionally not pushing it<sup>12</sup>.

At low-college-sending schools, an increased emphasis on testing overtakes substantive college planning. 10<sup>th</sup> graders are more likely to be signed up for the PSAT by the school. In fact, the counselor at Public-V told me that *all* 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders take it (even though it is bizarre and functionally useless for 12<sup>th</sup> graders to take the PSAT). Likewise, counselors at low-college-sending schools talk about signing students up for the SAT as a primary task of their one-on-one meetings (in particular when students are eligible for fee waivers), where high-college-sending counselors might do this only rarely (for example, to help their first-generation college students), or leave general instructions for group meetings. Bureaucratic tasks and paperwork thus fill the time that is used at high-college-sending schools for substantive planning and expectation management.

### *Complex, Extended Timelines*

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, testing in many ways shape the limits of post-secondary aspirations; if you want to get in to an Ivy League college, you'd better do well on the SAT. But it is also true that students at high-college-sending schools do a significant amount of independent test prep, according to their counselors. Perhaps counselors attempt to counter what they see as *too much* emphasis on test prep among their students by downplaying it themselves.

High-college-sending schools tend to start the whole college planning process earlier and end it earlier than low-college-sending schools. For example, at Public-J counselors have students developing lists of colleges to which they might apply in the winter of the junior year, in part to facilitate visiting those colleges and in part in response to parent demand. The counselor describes:

Public-J: We try to [give parents a list of colleges] earlier and earlier in the year and I think that's something new that most schools are doing. It seems that many schools, many parents want this stuff sooner, sooner than the spring in the kid's junior year. That's good to some point because it gives them the springtime to do some visiting. We encourage visiting as probably the most important research you can do regarding college. What we tell the kids is go during the week, go on a weekday early in the week, not towards the end of the week.

Note that this counselor conceptualizes their job not only as helping students develop a list of schools (or even providing it up front), but as actively teaching the student *how and when* to visit a college for maximum benefit. At Public-H, counselors require an earlier application deadline even than the colleges:

Public-H: So anyway as seniors we encourage them to start putting together the applications, and we help them with the applications, and we try and encourage them to make sure all their applications are out usually before Thanksgiving holidays, if they can do that. So we encourage them to apply early, and certainly before we break at the midyear we want to make sure all of them are out.

In contrast, Public-Y (which I characterize as a failing school) has barely begun the application process at the point when Public-H is finishing up:

Public-Y: I would say the bulk of the applications go out between January and February. What I'd like to see is December, but mostly in January and February. We start the process very early in November.

This timeline might, of course, be heavily influenced by the student population; first generation and poor students – who are overrepresented at schools like Public-Y – are also more likely to have trouble meeting college and financial aid application deadlines,



in part because neither they nor their parents have ever gone through that process before. The late start in the counseling office thus compounds students' delays to result in extremely late applications.

Because high-college-sending schools start and end the process earlier, they have significant flexibility at the tail end, and in particular, they can extend the tail end of the application process when necessary. This allows a much higher degree of individual attention, as the counselor at Public-E describes:

Public-E: And then, when we reach a point where there's a lull, we'll look through our list, and kind of go, ok who hasn't come at all, to kind of say, what are you thinking? You know, where are you? And knowing that some college deadlines will extend later on into the year.

The "lull" created in the schedule by starting earlier allows counselors to follow up with particular students who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Schools that delay applications until January run up against time constraints that prevent such a "lull" from existing – counselors must start to meet with each student about scheduling for the next year, for example, generally by February or March. This takes up most of the spring, so any business with graduating seniors really must be taken care of beforehand.

This follow-up is made more effective when counselors deploy, in combination, their knowledge of colleges with later application deadlines. Similarly, at Private-B, where the counselor is under significant school and parent pressure to make sure every student is accepted to a respectable four-year college, she deploys proactive management of the application list in concert with highly specialized admissions information:

ADE: do you ever have students who don't get in to any of their schools, or do you really try to negotiate the list so that they'll have someplace they get in?

Private-B: I really do [...] What happens is that NACAC [National Association of College Admissions Counselors] website comes out soon after May 1 [the National Candidates' Reply Date] with a spaces available list and they list all the schools, um I

think it's a space available survey. And they list all the schools that are still accepting applications. And there are actually some very good ones on there which leads me to believe that some of the, some of the good schools are reserving spaces for kids, top kids who have gotten denied at all their schools. Though membership to NACAC is available to any school counselor for a modest annual membership fee, none of the public school counselors I interviewed indicated membership, despite the obvious and significant admissions advantages that access to the space available survey conveys to students.<sup>13</sup>

While high-college-sending schools start earlier and end earlier, they also describe strategically delaying the start of the college admissions process. Counselors repeatedly told me about the demands they face from parents who want to start talking college from 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and how they negotiate delaying those conversations. For example, at Private-A, there is a counselor whose job it is to help delay the college conversations. The counselor describes the pressures students face:

Private-A: A lot of schools [...] try to sort of hold at bay the families that are trying to get into the whole college thing as freshmen and sophomores. Because it's just developmentally inappropriate. Could you have a high school experience first? So [the 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> grade counselor] does a fair amount of just trying to, you know, calm people down. Thus, the school deploys resources to manage the "helicopter parents" or the over-involved concerted cultivators who wish to begin the college application process before high school. Along the way, high-college-sending schools are simultaneously laying the

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<sup>13</sup> As of this writing in May 2012, the NACAC Space Availability Survey is free to anyone, and is listing 362 institutions with freshman space available (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2012). The list includes the following institutions in New Jersey: Caldwell College, Centenary College, Drew University, Felician College, Monmouth University, Rider University, Rutgers-Camden Campus, Saint Peter's College, Seton Hall University, Somerset Christian College, William Paterson University, as well as more than two dozen in New York and three dozen in Pennsylvania.

groundwork for college admissions, by actively engaging in what they do consider developmentally appropriate activities for younger students. For example, while describing to me how they delay the college talks, the counselor at Public-A tells me how she prepares younger students for those very same college talks:

Public-A: We really try to stay from the college information really until tenth grade cuz the parents at that point you know need to hear something. I do show them to kick them in the butt a little I do show [the 9<sup>th</sup> graders] a transcript of a student, what goes to colleges.

In other words, 9<sup>th</sup> graders at Public-A are explicitly taught from the very beginning of high school what a transcript is, how to read it, and how it plays into their college applications process; but this is not conceptualized as part of the college applications process *per se*. This “pre-application” preparation helps set students’ expectations at a very early stage, by assuming that all 9<sup>th</sup> graders will eventually be applying to college. It also gives students a baseline on which to gauge themselves as they learn about college admissions standards. The counselor at Public-A goes on to describe meeting with the minority of 10<sup>th</sup> graders who did *not* take the PSATs, explaining that “I actually congratulate them for not taking the PSAT.”<sup>14</sup> In a school context that is perhaps hyper-conscious of the college admissions process, students who do not take the PSAT in 10<sup>th</sup> grade might be considered behind the curve; this counselor wants to emphasize that she feels the 10<sup>th</sup> grade PSAT is unnecessary, and that students who have a more relaxed

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<sup>14</sup> The PSAT also functions as the National Merit Scholar Qualifying Test, a first-round cut on the prestigious National Merit Scholarship competition. It only counts for 11<sup>th</sup> graders, but many 10<sup>th</sup> graders with their eye on prestigious colleges take the PSAT as a practice. Some schools pay for this (as they generally do for all 11<sup>th</sup> graders); at others parents must pay for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade test.

attitude toward college admissions are still on the right track towards college. Likewise, she explains how at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade parent night the school emphasizes deferring college applications, but at the same time laying out explicit expectations of what *can* be properly done in 10<sup>th</sup> grade:

Public-A: OK and then preliminary, preliminary visits and that's a low key exposure. We tell parents you know if you're going to Vermont skiing drive through - you know drive through a few schools and just stop around here and that kind of stuff. But don't make it official. So schools strategically delay the start of college admissions process, but simultaneously lay significant groundwork for that process which makes it much easier and more productive when they do "officially" start.

The practical importance of this complex timeline is tremendous in terms of getting students accepted into what counselors, parents, and students themselves consider appropriate colleges. For the high-college-sending schools, it is essentially a *flexible* timeline overlaid on a seemingly rigid (but also potentially flexible) set of college application deadlines. Counselors who are knowledgeable about the application process can help students navigate those deadlines, at the opening by doing significant and substantial work to prepare students for the application process in the years leading up to the "official" start, and at the tail end by having knowledge of schools with later or rolling deadlines, or by checking the NACAC "space available survey".

At high-college-sending schools, the flexibility in the calendar that allows sophisticated scaffolding, combined with counselors who are college-application-savvy leads to fewer students falling through the cracks. Because counselors have a lull in the timeline, students who haven't gotten accepted to a college in the spring of their senior

year are first *noticed* by their counselors and second *counseled* by them in order to get them accepted somewhere.

### *Shortened, Simple Timelines*

Low-college-sending schools, as indicated above, start and end the college planning process later. Counselors at high-college-sending schools described to me in great detail how and at what times they counsel the 11<sup>th</sup> graders, while at low-college-sending schools the process typically begins with the start of senior year:

ADE: What about the 11<sup>th</sup> graders?

Public-T: There's not much to say.

Starting so late results in a truncated timeline because students and counselors simply run out of time to do college planning during the senior year. By spring, not only are many college deadlines past, but counselors must move on to scheduling classes for the next year. Students do not have time to visit colleges during the summer. The truncated timeline leaves no time for dealing with special cases, and there is no lull during which counselors can regroup and assess the status of their seniors.

On the extreme end of the shortened, simple timeline is Public-Y. I classify Public-Y as a failing school, not primarily because of its low post-secondary outcomes, but because it enacts policies that actively harm its students' successful preparation for post-secondary education. In response to low parent involvement at the school, for example, the guidance office decided that parents would be required to attend the back to

school night in person in order to get their children's report cards (which also saved the school significant postage):

Public-Y: I'd like to see parents [more]- I'll show you the report cards that are out there. We had a back to school night and you'll see all the report cards that parents didn't come to pick up. So now how do you monitor what your kid's doing academically if you don't see what they're doing?

ADE: And they have to come to the back to school night to get the report card?

Counselor: Yeah. They haven't come and I gave a lot to the seniors- I felt the seniors should have their report card, but you'll see, I'll show it to you [3 stacks 2 inches thick of report cards never picked up by parents].

While the goal of involving more parents is worthy, withholding report cards minimizes the amount of information students and their parents have about their college-readiness, and truncates the amount of time they have to conduct their post-secondary planning.

Students may not even accurately assess whether they are on track to graduate, much less understand what realistic post-secondary educational destinations might be available.

The end result of the shortened timeline is that many more students fall through the cracks at low-college-sending schools. Many students might have been admitted to more selective schools had they had better counseling. While students at high-college-sending schools likely already have by the spring of junior year a list of status-matched colleges to which they will apply, students at Public-Y might well spend the summer before senior year not knowing they have no hope of graduating high school on time. Certainly, with more scaffolding over their high school years, these students would have had more realistic post-secondary goals. It is this management of post-secondary expectations that I take up in the next section.

## EFFECTS: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Counselors at every school describe one of the most emotionally-wrought aspects of their job as fighting unrealistically high student or parent expectations. At Public-K, the counselor describes how Rutgers is inappropriately seen as a safety school:

Public-K: It's amazing how many people think, 'Oh my kid will just go to Rutgers'. The kid's got a C average.[...] No, they got to be accepted there. And it's not the easiest thing in the world. And so we kind of wake them up some of it, to that you have to look a little bit more deeply at what these colleges are expecting. Nevertheless, "waking them up" to their unrealistic expectations is especially tricky and challenging, not least due to a legitimately unpredictable admissions process (Stevens, 2007). Counselors are also subject to reprisals from parents angry about real or perceived slights. Thus they try to get students to acknowledge their unrealistic goals without telling them outright. A major way they do this is by showing students "where they fall on the graph". The counselor at Public-D describes the process:

Public-D: My old office I had a sign over the door that said 'shatterer of hopes and dreams'. [laughs] Here it's great because we have this beautiful book, when a kid tells me they want to go to Harvard and they have a 2.5, I can say well really, last year we had a student apply to Harvard with a 4.3 and a 1540 on his SATs and he was rejected. So I'm able to actually look at data from our own kids. I've never said no to a student, never tell a student they can't do something, but they need to have a Plan B. That's kind of a reach, do we have a more realistic goal. [...] But I used to joke, 'shatterer of hopes and dreams'. Hello, you haven't passed a class in 4 years so where do you think you're going? I'm not going to sugar coat it, you don't have 3 years of math, you're going to County College. Then I get calls from parents, 'How dare you shatter my child?' It's not shattering, it's real! It's just not happening. [...] So though I shatter dreams it's based on reality, it's not just me. And generally I'll go online and pick a school, and we'll go online, in black and white it says [you need] Algebra 2 , so then it's not me, even though it's me saying it, it's not me saying it.

The strategy is popular among most of the counselor I interviewed. The data Counselor-P describes above are time-intensive to track, so most schools that do this use proprietary software called Naviance. Naviance tracks applications and outcomes at individual colleges for individual students within a high school. This allows counselors to compile multi-year data they can show students to give them a sense of their likelihood of

acceptance (see Figure 2). Becker and Stephan describe this as “gatekeeping by software” (Becker and Stephan, 2011) because counselors can “let them do the math”. Naviance is an effective way of managing student expectations, in particular because it facilitates counselors being able to *show* rather than *tell* students whether it’s realistic for them to apply to a particular college.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of such demonstrations is to manage application lists so that students will have some acceptances, even if those acceptances are at two-year colleges. Counselors “let” students apply wherever the students want, but are careful to ask: what if you don’t get in?

#### *Expectation Management Is Facilitated or Hindered By the Planning Timeline*

All schools must manage their students’ expectations, but this takes time and individual attention to do well, particularly supervising individual students’ lists. This is a key reason that schools with complex extended timelines are more able to do it well. Remember Public-A, where students are taught from 9<sup>th</sup> grade how to read a transcript. Such students will have very good understandings of their own academic preparation and how that relates to requirements for college admission at various sorts of schools. This allows students to spend all of high school adjusting their expectations, or even adjusting their grades and workloads to better prepare them for their goals.

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<sup>15</sup> Though the software does cost a significant amount of money, my sample does not exhibit strong correlations between access to it and four-year college-going rates; this is in contrast to Becker and Stephan’s findings (2011).



A longer timeline also allows both counselors and students to manage “fit”, the ultimate success of the college choice. This is an additional layer of discussion, because not only must students and counselors assess their likelihood of getting in, they also must evaluate whether a student will like the college and stay there. Counselors at high-college-sending schools worry about whether students successfully transition to four-year colleges, and they hear rumors about “reverse transfers” back to the local county college.

Public-J: This is a small insulated community, they’ve known each other since birth. So now you’re going to plop them down in the middle of Rutgers with the trucks and the people and the concrete and the busses and the campuses and they don’t – ‘How do I do this? I don’t know anyone here’. So connected to [Public-J] is this idea of fit fit fit especially residence halls. Our kids need that here, they’re not diverse, they’re not sophisticated here, they’re insulated. When we have kids come back and say, ‘I’m transferring’. Why are you going to transfer? ‘I don’t like it, I don’t have friends, I don’t know what to do’. I think that displays their lack of ability to make friends, to interact with people they don’t know.

An extended timeline allows students time to contemplate how college might be different from their high school experience, to visit colleges and see how they *feel* when they are there, to prepare psychologically and emotionally for entering a new and very different social situation. These are all things that help ease the transition and increase the likelihood of success.

In contrast, low-college-sending schools with shortened, simple timelines are characterized by a failure to manage expectations. Students at these schools have not been scaffolded over a period of time to align their expectations with their realistic post-secondary possibilities. They have less time to think about where they might fit in the status hierarchy of college, and have less knowledge about what those status hierarchies are. They have, however, been hearing that ‘everyone can go to college’ and they have been participating in the markers of college preparation, such as taking the SAT and

courses they think are college-prep. They face devastating blows to self-esteem when they suddenly realize they have misgauged their opportunities:

Public-X: When we give out GPAs in the junior interviews they're decimated. You know you have a 1.8 GPA, you're not going to any college. Note that at this school, most students actually *do not know* their GPAs until the spring of their junior year. It would be impossible to accurately estimate one's place in the college status hierarchy without such knowledge.

Lacking the groundwork in setting expectations, counselors at low-college-sending schools are left with the clean-up. The counselor at Public-P describes what happens:

Public-P: But these kids think that even after all that prep work and explanation they're going to college. Honey, you have a 2.3 GPA. They get it in their minds that I finished high school so I'm going there. So we have to deal with, because we're guidance counselors, all the tears and upsetment. Because I'm not going to turn around and say no you can't apply there. [...] So now [February] all the rejection letters are coming in. Students who have come to believe that they will attend college thus have to quickly reconcile their rejection letters with their self-image and their educational and career goals. By February of their senior year, there is little they can do to change their high school preparation or their likelihood of admission to a four-year college.

Rather than starting early to align ambitions and expectations with students' preparation, Public-Z helps seniors resign themselves to two-year colleges:

Public-Z: [Our students go to the] County College. It has a stigma, so many kids go, they're in the lower tier, so it's the reality but they don't want to go because it associates them with that. It's the only option, and it's not a bad option. We start preparing students very early in senior year for that reality. Not only does this counselor believe in the two-year school as a reasonable option for students – a belief that is likely not borne out by rates of completion or transfer – the students enter their senior year believing they will go somewhere 'better'. I take up the

issue of managing expectations, from the students' perspective, in Chapter 4, where I discuss the psychosocial difficulties students face in assessing their place in the school and the post-secondary status hierarchy.

### *Asymmetry in Expectations*

It is important to point out the asymmetrical nature of post-secondary expectations. The primary concern counselors have is managing expectations that are too high, and counselors have developed detailed repertoires for handling such problems. However, no such detailed discussion occurs around expectations that are too low. In some ways, this makes sense: students and parents, particularly at the high-college-sending schools, come in with wildly unrealistic expectations. The counselor at Private-A has a hard enough time getting students to apply to appropriate schools: "I don't use the word safety because to me that sort of implies a certain amount of nose-holding, like 'I don't want to go there'". Even I, as the interviewer, was largely blind to this bias. My questions, from the first interview, focused on how counselors handled students who apply to schools to which they were not likely to be admitted (likely influenced by the fact that I interviewed both private school counselors first). Even when I attempted to ask about both sides, counselors largely ignored the question. For example, here is an exchange from my first public school interview:

ADE: How much do you want to or try to guide student's choices about colleges? Like if you see somebody applying to really, um schools that are, that they're not going to get into, or, or that they could get into better schools than they're applying to [mumbled]?

Public-C: Um, I, you know, I take a fairly honest approach with kids. I never say, you're not going to get in. Because you just don't know. You know, kids can have athletic ability. They could have a talent and have a poor GPA. Or it's an athletic issue, and they're gonna get in. Um, but I want to make sure that kids have a wide variety of choices. And sometimes when I see kids being very stubborn as to, I'm only going to look at this school, because that's what I think I want. Then you know what, you don't have to commit anyplace. But, it's like shopping for a house. I always use that scenario. Shopping for a house, everyone wants something different. Note how inarticulately and unspecifically the counselor handles the latter half of the

question; this is likely because – unlike with the too-high expectations scenario – it is a scenario that is relatively rare, and that the counselor has not practiced for. Even I fumbled the question in another interview:

ADE: What do you do if you have a kid who is applying to really inappropriate schools? Either schools that they're probably not going to get into, or some other [mumbled]

Public-B: Um... Well we do a lot of, um, you know, educating beforehand. And explaining the whole selection process. And how, you know, even the best don't get into some of these schools. And the counselor picks up on the cue and talks exclusively about too-high expectations.

But in another sense, this bias does not make sense; if we are intent on sending all students on to college, shouldn't a primary focus of the counseling process, especially in low-college-sending schools, be devoted to identifying students with inappropriately low expectations? Even at the high schools with extremely low rates of college attendance, too-high expectations was the main concern. When they did address too-low expectations, counselors attributed them to lack of parental support or the student not wanting to move away from home. One notable exception is Public-X, where the counselors were heavily invested in encouraging their weaker students to attend a County College. I quote this at length because it gives great insight into how these counselors think about their academically weaker students:

Counselor 1: When we got to the lower ranks [of students] we showed a great video on 2 year colleges. Because we said to them, all of you have a second chance by going to a community college and transferring to Rutgers or wherever. Which was really shocking to them because you know some of them have been writing themselves off because they don't have the 16 Carnegie units, they don't have the GPA, they don't have SAT scores, you know and that type of thing, so they think that they can't go to college.

Counselor 2: And also our talk changed slightly. You know when we were talking to that grouping of students, we I don't want to say watered down because that's the wrong terminology, but we adjusted what we had to say. Like I usually talked about visiting the schools and I focused more on what their abilities were, what they liked to do, what they were good at so they could see a lot of good things about themselves and their potential because sometimes no one has ever said that to them. We always encourage them to find what they're good at, what they feel good about doing. So when we meet with that type of student who is focusing more on a two year school or technical, some of them don't know that there's something beyond high school. Not because we haven't educated them, because they haven't recognized a skill in themselves. So, we change it up a little bit when we're talking to them.

Counselor 1: I have to admit, it was amazing, it was about a 20 something minute video, how many different opportunities hands-on there were. And different things than we thought – glassblowing to medical assisting to flying, you know being a pilot, the big thing now is graphic, designing computer games. Now some kids don't even know where to go for that but all these things, there's more practical stuff at a 2 year college than say at Rutgers.

Counselor 2: And what was nice is the people in the video, like there is a pilot, she flies for the United States, and she's now back in a community college because she'd like to major in science, and she's much older than them, and she's now majoring in biology because she might like to go to medical school. So it was nice to have them see that, sometimes life will take you down a different path. You may go one way and find out something you're even better at or different interest. So that video, and you could have heard a pin drop in that auditorium. And sometimes what happens when you have a student like that who's not the top academically, they tend to be silly and not pay attention.

Counselor 1: In other words, 'What are you talking to us about, we're losers, we're lucky if we graduate high school.'

Counselor 2: Because that's how they, that's what their parents have been telling them, that's what their friends have been telling them, what they've been telling themselves

Counselor 1: And some of them have tried algebra and they failed it, they've tried chemistry and they failed it. They didn't take the PSAT. So they think I'm screwed. So I start with, 'Every one of you in this auditorium can go to college,' and they look at me like, what? And now we've really developed an incredible relationship with County College which used to be the bottom of the barrel.

So these counselors are clearly invested in raising the expectations of their low-achieving students. And indeed perhaps this helps more students go to college. But these are weak students being encouraged to go to a weak two-year college, so their chances of completing a certification are vanishingly low. There is little encouragement – at Public-X or other schools – for weak students to make the jump to four-year colleges. With better counseling, many students might have been admitted to college in the first place, or to more selective schools, and certainly students would have had more realistic understandings of their chances of attending post-secondary education. Given the fact that students, and particularly minority students, are more likely to finish post-secondary degrees if they go to the most selective school they can get in to (Bowen et al., 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2006), this asymmetry must be addressed.

#### EFFECTS: MANAGING OUTLIERS; OR, WHO FALLS THROUGH THE CRACKS

All the schools at which I interviewed counselors have post-secondary outliers. Even at Public-A, 14% of students do not go directly to four-year colleges, and at Public-Z, 22% of students do. I find that schools have difficulty anticipating the challenges facing those “outlier” students and appropriately advising them. Outlier students get *systematically less applicable* counseling within schools, even and perhaps especially in schools that send high percentages to four-year colleges. Students who are ill-served by the dominant track are the ones who fall through the cracks.

At low-college-sending schools, the outliers are those going on to college, whether to two-year, four-year, or even to selective colleges. The short and simple

timelines of college application available to students at such schools circumvent students' aspirations, bolstered by the bias in assuming that student expectations are always and only *too high*. On the whole, more students fall through the cracks at low-college-sending schools. Many students are devastated to find themselves in their senior years suddenly shut out of the college dreams they had cultivated.

Counselors are most likely to recommend the path they know most about, the one they took: directly moving from high school to a four-year college. When it is clear that this path is untenable for some of their students (due to emotional immaturity, lack of money, or insufficient academic preparation), they recommend the next closest thing: starting out at a two-year college and transferring. Two of the counselors I interviewed started at two-year schools and transferred on successfully for their BAs; they were both highly supportive of that route. I asked one if he had any sense of how many students transferred on from two-year colleges:

Public-G: I'd say more than 50%, 60%, 70%. Because you have a certain number who go because they don't want to go to work yet, they just go to hang out. But the kids I went with, they all went on, maybe it took them 3 years to get out. But I'd say it's pretty high.

Researchers know that emotionally or academically underprepared students are the ones least likely to obtain a bachelor's degree via this route, but counselors are generally unaware of this. From national data, we know that less a quarter of students finish their two-year degrees in 6 years, and less than 10% of those who start at two-year schools finish bachelor's degrees (Transitions Committee and Practitioners Advisory Group, 2007). While it's perhaps refreshing that the counselor is so optimistic about his students' chances, his advice sets up wildly unrealistic expectations for students. Because counselors do not have access to post-secondary outcome data beyond the senior exit

surveys they administer in May, they are never able to evaluate the appropriateness of their advice.

There are also cracks and gaps even at what might generally be considered “successful” schools like Public-A. At these schools, students who do not follow the traditional and expected route to four-year college are the outliers. The counselor at Private-A, for example, describes how difficult it would be to stray from that path:

Private-A: It’s very rare for a student here not to go to college. Certainly it’s not because we think they should be going to college. If a student comes to me and says, you know, ‘I’m not really sure,’ that would be kind of exciting for me. Because I don’t see it very often. And because honestly, after having been on the other side of this work, because I came, as many people do, from working in admissions. We used to love seeing applications from students who’d taken some time off. Because we know that culturally, it’s a juggernaut. It’s really hard to get off that track. At high-college-sending schools where college is assumed as a default outcome, counselors are able to wax on indefinitely about their college planning process and timelines. But they have little to say about their non-college-bound outliers, seem to spend little time thinking about them, and more frequently are at a loss. For example, the counselor at Public-G:

Public-G: I think that’s where I think we’re somewhat deficient here because we don’t have a career center for them, cuz most kids do go off to college. So when we have kids that don’t have college in mind, then we kind of scramble somewhat. Note that this counselor distances career planning from counseling: the *school* doesn’t have a career center, so the *school* is deficient – which may result in the counselor scrambling to help a student, but is at least somewhat out of the normal scope of the counselor’s job.

Other counselors at high-college-sending schools similarly describe guiding the non-college-bound as outside their scope of practice. At Public-O, the counselor explicitly defers career-related counseling to the votec teachers:



Public-O: Um, we do have a small portion that do go to work right after. A lot of the times they're very involved with our work study. Or votec. And what happens with that, like I have one student this year. He's going to be an electrician. He already has a job at Russo's electric company when he gets out. Um, we take an active role. We give them whatever materials that they need. But a lot of time, it's the work study teachers, or more importantly, the votec teachers. And they have all the, um, contacts in the community. And they say oh, we've got this great kid. They go on interviews and they're done. So, it's - we play a role, but it's more the teachers that help them, set up the students, with the real world jobs after.

So while the counselor says they take an active role in advising work-bound students, that active role is limited to allowing votec teachers to take over for them.

A disturbingly common response, however, is for counselors at high-college-sending schools to assume that the non-college-bound are disabled. For example:

ADE: [What about the] five percent who [don't go to a four-year or two-year college]?

Public- A: What do they do? They work. You know, um, some drop out of school. You know, some get kicked out. Oh, I know what I should tell you what we have here that we work a lot with our transition coordinator. For special ed. She helps too with the job placement.

Or, similarly:

ADE: How are they deciding whether or not to go to college?

Public- C: Um, the lower group of kids who don't really have a plan, or maybe are more disabled, and can't handle a 4 year school or a 2 year school.

Thus there is a widespread assumption at high-college-sending schools that the only reason not to go to college immediately after high school is academic failure or disability. This is surely a disservice to students, as well as representing a failure of imagination on the part of counselors, parents, and students about what post-secondary options are available. Despite the current economic importance of completing some post-secondary education – by 2018, nearly two thirds of jobs will require post-secondary education (Carnevale and Smith, 2011) – there is no requirement for that to take place immediately upon graduating high school. In fact, for many students, taking some time to do

something different might well make them more attentive and committed college students when they do get there.

## CHALLENGES IN POST-SECONDARY PLANNING: LACK OF OUTCOME DATA

Counselors at all high schools are hobbled by a lack of feedback about the ultimate effectiveness of the counseling they do, as evidenced by actual post-secondary outcomes. High-college-sending schools are more likely to attempt to seek such data, which enables them to more effectively scaffold their students. But counselors generally are unaware of the body of literature on post-secondary outcomes. It is highly unusual for schools to have access to post-secondary outcome data even for their own students, but extremely useful when they do. Of all the schools at which I interviewed counselors, Public-H was the only school that successfully obtained such data:

Public-H: And our follow up studies that we do, we're getting good reports back from the students in college, saying yes I felt prepared when I left there. And that's nice, because that's a way for us to gear our curriculum. And to make sure that we're doing the right thing, training them for the programs. Much more common is that schools have no feedback. Some are suspicious about the college-transition success of their students, for example this counselor who believes the high college-sending rate at her school is inflated:

Public-L: What is of interest to me which we do not know the data is, I suspect a lot of our kids go off to four year schools, don't make it and come back and end up at County. And I was just thinking on my way in I would love to get those numbers from them, I would be really curious as follow-up because my sense is many kids follow the American dream, they go off to four year schools, what percentage of them are really ready. Not academically not prepared – I think the kids are academically prepared – but just reality-based, socially, decision-making, that type of thing, work ethics, I'm not sure how well they're doing.

Post-secondary outcome data is collected through senior exit surveys conducted in May. These count whatever a student says they intend to do the following September as the official post-secondary outcome reported to the state. This misclassifies students who plan to start at the county college and then fail to do so, as well as students who “reverse transfer” from a four-year college. It is likely that there is systematic bias in the reporting, for two reasons. First, it is likely that more students who say they will attend two-year colleges will fail to enroll compared with those who say they will attend four-year colleges (because four-year colleges are more likely to involve more buy-in: higher tuition, moving away from home, an application process, and a deposit). Second, there is wide variation within and across schools in the completeness and accuracy of the exit data they collect. Relying on senior exit surveys, counselors never know how many students do not follow through with stated plans.

In the face of this dearth of data, counselors rely on hearsay and personal experience to fill in the blanks. This means that counselors scaffold their students to post-secondary futures they actually know little about. Counselors often assume that no news is good news, believing that students are happily pursuing their college goals. The feedback mechanisms are likely biased here. Schools, teachers, and students like to celebrate success, so it’s more likely that “successful” students will report back how they’ve done. This increases the biased perceptions that students who start at four-year schools stay there and graduate, and that students who start at 2-year schools finish and transfer on. Students who fail to show up for college in the fall, for whatever reason, are not likely to come to the attention of counselors. This increases the likelihood that counselors will recommend college (and two-year colleges in particular) as a viable post-

secondary route for impoverished or academically weak students, because they're simply not hearing about the majority of students for whom that route does not work.

### *Lack of Data Becomes a Data Point*

Emblematic of the way in which counselors operate is their ability to turn the *lack* of data into a data point. Counselors do not always know every student very well, and yet they have to write college letters of recommendation for some of them. The counselor at Public-K describes how:

Public-K: [T]hat tells me a lot when I'm writing the recommendation. If I've hardly seen the student, I can right away say who's an independent person who handles things on their own, who doesn't need a lot of work, who can listen to what I lay out to them and follow the directions. You've got a lot of things you can put in there right there. Because you hardly know this person. Of course, the fact that the counselor rarely sees a particular student could mean a lot of different things: that the student feels uncomfortable asking for advice from the counselor, that the student is simply falling through the cracks and making no post-secondary plans, that the student is seeking advice elsewhere. But repeatedly, counselors assumed this indicated independence and self-reliance, and described writing recommendations accordingly. (Indeed, perhaps counselors simply *wish* this were true, to help ease their loads.)

The belief that if the school doesn't know about a student, the student is doing ok, is also communicated to parents. A parent reported to me that she had to call the school to learn how her daughter's college application process was going. She said, "I would just be like, is she applying for scholarships? Is she talking to anybody, is she ok? They're

like, yeah, her grades are great, I don't know her, they say, so it must be good because we don't know her name, to say, who's your daughter? Maya who?" It is easy to see how parents who are not themselves well-versed in the college application process would take the school's word that everything was on track. In Lareau's (2006b) terms, the school is actually telling the mother not to worry about concerted cultivation. This exacerbates the existing inequality in parental involvement with the college process.

#### A NOTE ON CASELOAD

Counselors often explain their workload – and indirectly, their pedagogical approach – in terms of size of caseload: how many students, and in particular how many seniors, for whom they are responsible. Seniors take the most time, and in some ways are most affected by lack of individual attention from their counselors. Certainly this seems to have some face validity: a larger caseload means more work for the counselor and less individual attention for each student. However, among the schools I studied, this relationship was weaker than counselors imagined it to be. For example, the load at Public-R is on the high end, but it is lower than several of the high-college-sending schools. Counselors' time is taken up by a number of activities other than meeting with students. In particular, they frequently lamented the burden of paperwork and standardized testing.

Nationally in 2003, average public high school caseloads were nearly 315, typically across all four high school grades; New Jersey falls around the middle (Hawkins and Lautz, 2008). In my sample, the high-college-sending schools' caseloads ranged from

180 to 290, with a mean of 244 and a median of 250; the low-college-sending schools' caseloads ranged from 130 to 300, with a mean of 246 and a median of 280. Counselors with exactly the same number of students describe wildly different college-planning timelines and contact hours with students. So while it is tempting to say that simply having more counselors and smaller counseling loads would solve all our post-secondary problems, it is more realistic to acknowledge that not all counselors are equally efficient and not all college-planning timelines are equally effective.

However, there is a dramatic difference in caseloads at private schools. The counselors I interviewed at Private-A and Private-B each had about 45 seniors, which they felt was a manageable load. This isn't so far off from the number of seniors public school counselors have (about 60), although those extra 15 may well tip the balance to unmanageable. Instead, what differs significantly is that both private school counselors were only responsible for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, so they had total caseloads around 100; they were fully focused on the college-planning process and not on early high school transitions or scheduling; and they were not responsible for clinical counseling. In addition, on average, they have wealthier students who had access to resources outside the school. These factors are what make the difference in the individualized attention available at private schools.

## COUNSELING FOR WHOM AND TOWARD WHAT?

Counselors at high-college-sending schools tend to *scaffold* the college-planning process. That is, they describe it in terms that indicate they know that applying can be an

emotionally and practically overwhelming process, that students have to learn a lot in order to successfully complete that process, and that the counselor's role is to help shepherd students through that learning process. Counselors who do not scaffold lack individualized attention and follow-up, and end up in an abortive or ineffective college planning process. Counselors who scaffold are continually engaged with students to evaluate their level of knowledge and preparation in the college admissions process, and to provide them the next rung to climb in the ladder. Paradoxically, this high involvement leaves counselors feeling more successful and less involved. Counselors who do not scaffold do not have such feedback; they are left feeling unsuccessful, un-listened to, and taken advantage of, and their students are left without support or guidance that is useful to them.

A major way scaffolding is accomplished at high-college-sending schools, those that send 60% or more of their students to four-year colleges, is by strategically managing a complex, extended college-planning timeline. This timeline starts earlier and ends earlier, while simultaneously but “unofficially” accomplishing college-planning work before and after the official college-planning process. Low-college-sending schools that do not successfully scaffold send under half of their students to four-year colleges. They enact simple, truncated timelines that start later and end later. Complex timelines allow counselors significant advantages in the college-planning process, which is probably why they are correlated with increased likelihood of four-year college admission. First, they allow a high degree of flexibility to tailor guidance to individual students. This helps ensure that fewer students fall through the cracks. For some students, having access to attentive, knowledgeable counselors can mean the difference between

attending college or not, or between attending a four-year versus a two-year college.

Second, complex timelines allow counselors to draw on specialized knowledge to take advantage of flexibility in the seemingly rigid college application calendar. For example, a savvy counselor may know which four-year colleges have later application deadlines, rather than simply assuming that students who are late will attend the local county college. Third, complex timelines allow counselors to manage student expectations much more effectively, which in turn improves college-going rates (by matching beforehand student applications with colleges to which they are likely to be admitted).

Some aspects of the college-planning timeline are tied to key college application deadlines. But guidance calendars are set idiosyncratically by district or school supervisors, and then implemented with varying fidelity by individual schools or counselors within schools. As a result of these counseling calendars and varying degrees of knowledge or training on the part of the counselor, students have vastly differential access to information and opportunities, leading to inequalities in post-secondary outcomes.

Of course, when we define the “best” schools as those that send high proportions of students to four-year colleges, then students at those schools who do not wish to or for some reason are not capable of following the expected college path can fall through the cracks as well. Some students may feel pressured into pursuing a post-secondary path that isn’t right, and some students will drop out of colleges that weren’t right – or weren’t right *yet*. This has important negative impacts on student self-esteem, as well as family and state finances. I find it particularly problematic that counselors at schools that send many students to four-year colleges assume non-college-bound students are drop-outs,



kicked out, or disabled. Surely there has to be another option, and surely such assumptions do not serve those students well. It's hard to imagine such students typically leave high school with concrete, realistic post-secondary plans.

It is worth considering whether schools are trying to be engines for equality, or whether they are simply matching their college-planning strategies to their student population's likely post-secondary destinations. The realistic possibilities for four-year college for many students at low-college-sending schools are slim. Why should counselors spend time helping students apply for schools where they are not likely to get accepted, even less likely to be able to afford, and not likely to attend even if accepted? Certainly, counselors at high-poverty schools have to handle on a daily basis issues that counselors at wealthy schools might never face. They might spend a significant part of their day on extra paperwork or liaising with social services or the criminal justice system, making it nearly impossible to provide the kinds of individualized college planning their students might get elsewhere. One might ask whether the scaffolding approach that enacts a strategic, extended timeline in high-college-sending schools is a luxury available only to wealthier, more educated student populations, or simply a response to the demands of parents there.

If we care about the intergenerational transmission of inequality, the answer must be that inequalities in college planning matter. It is clear that a given student would have access to dramatically different college planning – and likely different post-secondary options – in different schools. Setting individualized, realistic goals and then attaining them should not be a privilege reserved only for those with the most highly-educated, wealthiest parents. Poor kids in bad schools need even better counselors. If we as a nation

want to improve our rates of post-secondary education, the college planning process must be addressed. In the long run, it makes a bigger difference for completion whether a poor student gets admitted to a two-year versus a four-year college (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), than whether a middle-class student gets admitted to one particular four-year college or another. Spouting college as a universal goal, while failing to prepare students for realistic outcomes and failing to help them attain college as a goal is irresponsible, potentially damaging to students' self-esteem, and a waste of family and state resources.

This is not to argue that it should be only the low-income students who are counseled that college may not be a realistic possibility, or that college is the only acceptable outcome. It is important to take seriously the challenge that academics be wary of saying that *other peoples' children* need not pursue college (Goldrick-Rab, 2011). The private school counselors recognize that even the most academically-prepared and economically-privileged students may have good reasons not to attend college (at least, not straight out of high school). But such students would be choosing not to go to college from a place of privilege, where students at weaker schools may be financially or academically *incapable* of attending college; the choices are not parallel. Any discussion about higher education goals in the United States must address these multiple layers of privilege in order to come to an answer about how we value post-secondary education, and who should go.

In the following chapters, I explore how the post-secondary planning process plays out in the daily life of a New Jersey high school. Listening to what counselors say is important, but it is only a small part of the story – in fact, a vanishingly small part of the story, if we take students' word for it! Listening to counselors, it seems as if they

direct the post-secondary planning process. And yet, students spend very little time in contact with their counselors. Their school time is largely structured by their classroom experiences and by their friends. We must evaluate how post-secondary planning is woven through their everyday lives. In Chapter 3, I explore how a diverse high school structures its post-secondary messages to students, and in Chapter 4, I discuss how students navigate and negotiate that message.

### Chapter 3: Everyone should go to college, but college is not for everyone<sup>16</sup>

#### VIGNETTE: A SCENE FROM MY FIELDNOTES

It's late April, and we're in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom, a 5-minute class that starts every school day. It's 7:40 am. For some reason, this homeroom meets in the cafeteria, so a diverse group of students is spread out across 6 lunchroom tables while the Pledge of Allegiance is read on the announcements. I'm sitting at a long rectangular lunch table with 5 girls: one Filipina, one black, and three Indian. One asks another to 'pray to your hindi gods' for her SATs this weekend.

Their white guidance counselor is there, and she tells the class she has 'a bunch of stuff here for you in your college applications' – she hands out a packet and the book called the ABC's of College Planning, put out by the New Jersey Counselors' Association. She tells the students, 'Everybody ought to have one; if you're not interested, don't take one'.

She tells the students she'll be meeting with all of them individually. Then she comes over to the table I'm at, and says congratulations to the black girl. The girl doesn't know what the counselor is talking about. The counselor says she got some scholarship for black students. The girl asks, are you sure it was me? The counselor says she's gotten a letter, but the girl seems unconvinced. Later she chats with her tablemates about money: 'I'm so screwed for college!'

The bell rings, and as we move toward the door, I see a pile of college books left on the table where four black boys had been sitting.

On our way out into the crowded, noisy hallway, the Filipina girl asks if I'd seen the guy come in and then leave – she tells me that he had their report cards in hand, but he thought the counselor was the homeroom teacher so he left. She's disappointed because now they have to wait until tomorrow to see their grades.

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#### POST-SECONDARY PLANNING IS WOVEN COMPLEXLY INTO EVERYDAY LIFE

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<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Annette Lareau for assistance in framing this chapter.

In Chapter 2, I show how counselors structure the post-secondary planning process. But to students, post-secondary planning is not an abstraction in the calendar; it is woven in to students' everyday lives in complex ways. This five-minute slice of life in the high school above illustrates how students engage nearly simultaneously with institutional rules and restrictions, practices in the classroom setting, and informal interaction with their peers. Note all of the conflicting things that happened just in five minutes in the same 11<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom: one student is preparing for her SATs, while other students are discarding college planning books. The counselor tells students they should all have that book, but then suggests that maybe they *shouldn't* all have the book. Another girl thinks the counselor has her mixed up with someone else (why would an 11<sup>th</sup> grader be getting a scholarship?), but if the counselor is right, her worries about paying for college may be assuaged. An administrative error prevents students from getting their grades that day. There is, as Chimamanda Adichie reminds us (2009), danger in assuming a single story, even from such a small slice of life.

Even within a single student's life, post-secondary planning emerges mixed with all the other things they do, as in this description:

[Henry told me] the summer was busy because he took the SATs in June, then getting his license took lots of time & work and he got a new car (Acura) then had to deal with his grandfather losing his sight, then [visiting] Japan, then a lot of drama with his girlfriend.

And yet scholars often approach post-secondary planning as if we can isolate it for study. We ask about how many times counselors met with students, about how many colleges students applied to, about whether they studied for the SATs. But this is not how students experience post-secondary planning. They – like all of us – engage institutional structures

through the particulars of their days. And because they are in school, their interactions are often quick and tiny, never longer than the 42 minutes allotted for a class period.

I take as data in this chapter these small interactions, which echo across the school in different classrooms, different tracks, from different teachers. It might seem from the vignette above, for example, that the students who leave the books behind simply aren't interested. Instead, I problematize that "lack of interest" as a moment of stratification playing out in everyday practices. Thus, it was the black boys – who are demographically least likely to graduate from high school and attend post-secondary education – who left their books on the tables that morning. I was not able to ask the students why they took or left their books, but I see this as one incident in a pattern of interacting at school. Different students hear different messages from teachers, patterns which are reinforced in student interactions<sup>17</sup>.

Practice theory, as I describe in Chapter 1, is a useful way of theorizing those little slices of life in which post-secondary planning happens. These "ministories" are important because of their complexity, because they are layered, and because of how they are interwoven in students' everyday lives at school. In the chapter that follows, I discuss

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<sup>17</sup> I want to note from the outset that school officials – counselors and teachers – look bad in this chapter. The nature of analysis is to take slices of life out of context, and as such school officials often appear unlikable, if not vindictive and incompetent. To take this as a comprehensive picture of teachers and counselors would be doing them a grave disservice. Indeed, I could write a different chapter taking different slices of life at school that showed school officials to be compassionate, caring, hard-working, and at times deeply concerned about the futures to which they were sending students. And as I discuss in Chapter 6 (Methodological Appendix), the school was a happy, welcoming place where I would willingly send my own child. But the negative slices of life at school in this chapter really happened, and are an important – if largely unintentional, unconscious – part of the schooling of teens.

how “the school” accomplishes things. The school, of course, does not actually do anything itself; rather, the people who together constitute a larger social entity we call ‘the school’ are the ones who, individually, give lectures, grade papers, advise students, design programming and curricula, and all the rest that goes on in the school.

Nevertheless ‘the school’ is constituted as, in Bourdieu’s language, a distinct field of action (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]) with some uniform or at least generalizable practices. I observed the patterns I describe from teachers across the curriculum, in different tracks and social locations. Thus I use “the school” as a shorthand for all of the individual practices that actually make up “the school”.

*Everyone Should Go to College, but College Is Not for Everyone*

New Jersey High School faces a problem. It is a diverse, tracked system where less than half of the graduating class goes on to four-year colleges. But the school – the teachers and counselors – are invested like most of us in the deeply-held democratic ideal of equality of opportunity. Acknowledging that some students are not likely to go to college violates those ideals. And yet the teachers and counselors know that college is not likely for a substantial portion of their students. They mostly believe that college is the best route to a successful future life, and they lack information about other possibilities, yet they are loathe to think of half their students as failing. Furthermore, especially among students in the broad middle swath of the school, it’s not always predictable in advance which students will make it to college. This is an awkward position to hold.

There are lay theories at the school about who makes it to college and why. A counselor told me it was all about a “spark”:

She said, it’s not academics that get them there. Maturity? Strength? Core? Having an attitude? She had a girl at the top of her class who ended up a prostitute in New Brunswick. She had students at the top of the class who ended up not graduating for attendance reasons. ‘It’s a spark, the ones who make it show you a spark,’ and even the ones who are criminals have that spark. She said, ‘Some have that spark but they’ll make your head go’ [rolled her head around]. [2/2/2008]

There probably is something to the theory that disadvantaged students with a “spark” – whatever that means – are more likely to seek out the resources they need to achieve their goals – and are more likely to be noticed and assisted by their teachers. (Is the “spark” likability? It makes sense that likable students get more help.) In contrast, for some people getting to college is almost automatic – even the honors-track pot head who told me, “We go to class, teachers yell at us, we wake up one day and we’re in college”. An honors student might be able to nap his way into college, but that is not true for everyone. What happens to the students in the middle? We know little about how they actually approach post-secondary planning, and why they end up where they do.

The dominant perspective in the literature about the high school-to-college pipeline is that schools systematically push “College-For-All” (Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum et al., 2006). McDonough (1997), for example, shows that while there are inequalities in the quantity and quality of college prep available between schools, college is still the default goal. As described in Chapter 2, counselors tell all students they can go to college, pushing weak or poor students toward community college with the promise of transfer. Counselors are encouraged, on multiple levels, to send this college-for-all message. They are loathe, first of all, to be the “shatterer of hopes and dreams” (as one counselor put it), and they diligently attempt to avoid gate-keeping. To avoid conflict



with parents, counselors allow students to apply to schools to which they are not likely to get admitted. For example, the counselor at Public G told me, “We’re really hesitant in telling them it’s a long shot because parents come back, ‘Are you saying my kid’s not smart enough?’” Indeed, parents do often expect their children to go to college, even against the child’s wishes. When I asked in a focus group at NJHS what students would be doing in five years, a boy told me, “I think I’m gonna study medicine. I don’t know yet. I wanted to be an auto mechanic, but my mom almost stabbed me so”. Students, too, then, feel compulsion towards college, even in opposition to their desires.

Beyond this, counselors also feel that their job is to encourage students, which translates into letting them apply wherever they want:

Public V: You have to let them go right ahead and apply. And I always try to encourage that they have a safety school, that you know you’re going to get into even if it’s that technical school, so that at the end they’ll have more options and are able to make a decision. I don’t ever discourage them. But they know, I always encourage them to look back at the requirements, keep their GPA in mind. But far be it from me to tell you not to complete that application. All right, I’ll do my part. I don’t discourage them. I try to add options for them.

This counselor thus describes “adding options” in a way that makes it seem like students will actually have more colleges to choose from come springtime. But what she is actually talking about is students still left with *one* option: the technical school she encouraged them to apply to as a safety. Thus they send out more applications (often with application fees and essays), and get back more rejections. But the counselor does not have to be the one to break the news.

Another reason schools push college-for-all is that they are evaluated and ranked on their college-going rates. These rankings are not yet official, though there are increasing calls to formally evaluate guidance counselors and teachers based on these

percentages (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011). Beyond such official rankings, college-going rates are used widely by parents, teachers, and township officials as a crude measure of the success of a school. In addition, there are clear incentives for school officials to desire high college-going rates. Part of the incentive is due to the widespread American belief in the equality of opportunity afforded by schools; acknowledging that some students should not or are not socially or academically prepared to attend college is uncomfortable, because it highlights the stratification that remains. And in the context of expanding open access to two-year colleges, why shouldn't all students be encouraged toward college? The community college has been instrumental in expanding college access to new populations over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And because school officials lack concrete outcome data about completion and transfer rates, they reinforce the false idea that anyone can succeed by starting out at a community college.

The college-for-all push is historically connected to the phenomenon Burton Clark termed "cooling out" (Clark, 1960). As high school counselors began to eschew the gatekeeping function, they began to refuse to sort students into college-bound and non-college-bound. Instead, they increasingly push weak students toward community colleges, which are then faced with the unpleasant task of reconciling students' ambition with their low chances of success. As Clark put it, "The denial is delayed, taking place within the college .... [for] the student who intends to complete college and has been allowed to become involved but whose destiny is to fail." The argument is that we allow two-year colleges to temper the unrealistic academic aspirations of weak students, because high school counselors no longer do this. Cooling out can be framed as a tracking issue: getting students to sort themselves in a Bourdieuan way, based on their

“objective” performance in a legitimized academic setting. Combine that with college-for-all policies at the national, state, and local levels, and we have a recipe for streamlining high school students, no matter how un- or under-prepared, into whatever local open-access schools we can.

To the extent that this college-for-all paradox still plays out in contemporary high schools – and I believe it does – I am convinced like Rosenbaum and his collaborators that it is highly problematic. I spent two years studying the in-school post-secondary planning processes for “average” students at NJHS, a school that has a highly diverse student population and thus must manage a wide variety of student post-secondary outcomes. Drawing on my findings from interviews with counselors, described in Chapter 2, I hypothesized that NJHS might put everyone on a complex/extended or a simple/shortened timeline, or that it allowed students to be on different timelines, varying with the student’s “space” or “culture” in the school. While both of these are reasonable hypotheses about how a mixed school handles post-secondary planning, I found that NJHS took a third tack, and attempted to balance a college-for-all message against the reality that the majority of its students were not bound for four-year colleges. I characterize this as an explicit college-for-all message balanced against an implicit no-college-for-some message. In contrast to the simple, unilateral push toward college reflected in the literature, NJHS simultaneously supported and undermined a college-for-all message. By explicitly yet inconsistently promoting college-for-all, the school simultaneously undermined the college aspirations of some students. It sent a complex mixed message about how everyone should go to college, but college isn’t for everyone.

In this chapter I show how overlapping institutional structures are patterned to produce this discourse within NJHS.

#### COLLEGE-FOR-ALL AT NJHS

New Jersey High School, not surprisingly, officially supports and produces a college-for-all message. It does this by acting under the assumption that all students will be going to college. A college-for-all message is, perhaps, unexpected in high-track classes, for example this Level 1<sup>18</sup> trigonometry class of mostly seniors. The teacher in this class exhorts students to continue to pay attention and to review the course material at the end of the year, even if they do not have to take the final exam (students are exempt if they have A grades in each marking period):

[Teacher] says they're done with the textbook starting Thursday, and then they're on to her notes. They'll have a full 5 day review before finals, [...] and they're practicing 'even if you're exempt from the final, you still need this come Sept 1 whatever college you go to'.

She assumes they will all attend college (ignoring the minority of juniors in the class), and argues that they will all need to know trigonometry. Perhaps this is not a terrible assumption, given that the class is a high-level math class.

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<sup>18</sup> Classes at NJHS are tracked, in order from high to low: AP; Honors; Level 1; Level 2; HSPA-remedial. Not all subjects have each level; for example, Honors Physics is the highest level offered. Some classes, mostly Level 2 and HSPA-remedial, are "inclusion" classes that include disability-classified students and an in-class support teacher. Inclusion classes are euphemized as "classes with two teachers".

College-for-all discourse is most clearly seen, however, in classrooms where the majority of students are *not* obviously college-bound. It is explicit and assumed in discourse across tracks. For example, it was common to hear in low-track English classes personal stories from the teachers about how different college is from high school, and how “when you go to college, you start over”.

College was assumed in a senior English class I was in, a lowest level inclusion class which integrated students with classified disabilities. In the context of the school, these students are most likely to attend no college at all or perhaps a two-year (open admissions) college. When we arrive at the beginning of the period, the teacher has them continue working on their college essays. On the board was written:

10/26

Do Now:

Take out your brainstorming sheets  
& make sure you have the following  
categories filled out!

1. Characteristics (responsible, trustworthy, etc)
2. Evidence
3. Goals
4. Inspiration

Thus, the teacher was explicitly exhorting them to plan an essay in which they defended their qualifications for college. She was asking them to develop a paragraph around evidence for a personal attribute that might be valued by admissions officers. Such an assignment, while perhaps useful for students who apply to selective colleges, is at best an empty exercise for students in this class. Open-admissions colleges do not generally require essays; indeed, the nearby county college application requires only a high school transcript and \$25. Thus, requiring students in this class to develop essays sets them up

for failure – if they actually believe selective colleges are a realistic possibility – and for cognitive dissonance, as they sort out whether and where they are going to apply to college. This situation is particularly disheartening because many students in that room would be first-generation college-goers: I overhear at least three different students saying so. They thus could not rely on their parents' knowledge of the process to help them place themselves vis-à-vis post-secondary options.

Another way in which college-for-all is promoted is through the school's ignorance of other paths. Most teachers went directly to four-year colleges for their degrees and certifications, and then immediately went to work as teachers. A small minority started at two-year schools and transferred; they overestimate the success students will have with such a path. Teachers and counselors receive no explicit training in post-secondary planning; they thus draw on their own experiences and their on-the-job training. They extrapolate from students they know, with no feedback about students' actual outcomes. This is exacerbated by the way the school collects its post-secondary statistics, through senior exit surveys in May. If a student reports they are going to a two-year college in September, they are recorded as having done so, even though many do not actually attend.

The ways teachers simultaneously draw on their own limited experiences and fail to see the myriad options available to students, and thus send a college-for-all message, can be seen in the following example. I was in a HSPA-remedial English class for seniors who had failed the HSPA as juniors, and were re-taking it in order to graduate. This was an inclusion class, so there were two teachers. They were talking with the students:

Black boy says he got an 800 on the SAT.

Teacher 1: no offense but I don't believe you.

Then it becomes clear he means 800 combined [on two sections]. A few minutes later:

Teacher 1 says: not all of you should go to college. She says that you should try it, but more important is to be a productive member of society.

Teacher 2: college is not for everybody.

Teacher 1 says that her brother is in jail for selling drugs, that eventually everyone gets caught.

Black boy disagrees [about getting caught]; she says to come back and see her in 5 years [implying that he will have been proven wrong].

This fascinating exchange emphasizes the same message promoted in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class above: that everyone should try college, but it is 'not for everybody'. And yet, the juxtaposition of the discussion of jail and drugs implies that that is the only other option: you can go to college, or you can become a drug dealer and go to jail.

Finally, teachers sometimes foreclose post-secondary planning towards non-college goals. The school holds a job fair in the winter each year, where employers (mostly parents of students) set up booths to tell students what their field is like. It is often an excellent chance for students to talk to adult practitioners and get a sense of whether a field would be good for them. I was in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade HSPA remedial class the day of the job fair:

At the beginning of the period there's an announcement about the job fair. One of the boys – [a school bully] – REALLY wants to go. He's wearing shirt & tie – [... pleading desperately, repeatedly with the teachers to go.] Teachers think about it, then decide no.

This student could be quite difficult to deal with, so I don't fault the teachers for their exasperation. But nothing that happened in class that day was worth keeping him there, and there was some possibility he could have made some employment contacts.

In contrast, the ESL classes all visited the job fair. This was the only exception to the explicit college-for-all message I heard in my time at the school:

[Teacher] tells them they're going on a field trip, but only to the cafeteria, for career day: 'when you get out of this school and need a job'. Thus, as we might expect from the ethos in the air, NJHS explicitly pushes pretty much all its students toward college, hardly recognizing that there are other post-secondary pathways.

## NO-COLLEGE-FOR-SOME

Having established that NJHS promotes a college-for-all message across the curriculum and across track, however, it is now essential that I show how that message gets complicated and ends up as an implicit no-college-for-some message. I argue that the school does this in four ways: by literally sending mixed messages; through the intended or unintended consequences of its institutional structures; by equivocating about the value of two-year colleges; and by fostering or allowing misinformed discourse across tracks and among its families<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> There is a fifth way, which I do not address in this dissertation. The school also prepares some students *not* to go to college through the classroom and disciplinary practices enacted in its tracked pedagogy. For example, one day in a Level 2 English class the teacher read from a book, then distributed a half-sheet quiz, collected the quizzes, read from the book again, and distributed another quiz. The class was (surprisingly) actually quiet, and the teacher commented that they were learning an important, not a useless skill: to listen and repeat back. She said that the whole point of what they were doing was that "I read it to you, you listen, and you repeat it back". Contrast this with a typical day in the AP English class, taught by a teacher with a doctorate, in which students who are late do not disrupt instruction but instead slip in silently and join the activity, as happens in college classrooms. This aspect of tracking



### *Mixed Messages*

The first way the school negotiates complex mixed messages is by literally sending mixed messages. Recall from the vignette of the counselor handing out college planning books: ‘Everybody ought to have one; if you’re not interested don’t take one.’ The books cost \$3 each, so the school is understandably interested in students not simply throwing them away. But even straightforwardly acknowledging the fact that some students might throw them away – that some students have no use for them – also uncomfortably acknowledges the stratified nature of post-secondary outcomes. Statements are thus made in a non-committal, evasive manner that allows different groups of students to ‘hear’ the message they feel is appropriate for them.

Mixed messages can also be seen in the way college-for-all messages are handled in low-track classrooms. Take as example the English classroom described above, in which students are preparing college application essays. The teacher walked around the class, helping students select their personal attribute and the evidence for that attribute. She said aloud to the class,

“If you put ‘smart’ on your characteristics, then you need evidence like GPA or grades. If you don’t have a good GPA or grades, I suggest you don’t put smart, put something else.”  
 Apart from the problem of equating ‘smart’ with ‘grades’, such a statement essentially tells students in the class that they are probably *not* smart, certainly that the teacher

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also taps in to the widely-documented reality that better teachers seek out or are assigned to higher track classes (Oakes, 2005).

doesn't think they can use their academic achievements to justify their application to college. But for teens, if college is not for smart people, then what is it for? What business would a 'not-smart' person have going to college?

Indeed, this message was reinforced by the students a few minutes later in a discussion involving Jason, a kind, heavy-set football player who was often the butt of his friends' jokes. Jason says aloud to the class that he wants to be a brain surgeon. Someone calls out that he'll do more harm than good. Another student suggests he become a taste tester, something he is already good at. He says he'd love that job. Another student says, 'It would be the best job for you.' The students are not unaware that taste-testing is a non-credentialed, unskilled job, in distinct contrast to brain surgery. They thus have internalized, and reinforce upon each other, the message that they ought to be applying for college but that they are not intellectually prepared for college, and that they are not seriously expected to attend.

### *Consequences of Institutional Structures*

Another way the school promotes mixed messages has to do with the intended and unintended consequences of institutional structures. Below, I outline several of the ways in which the structures discourage college-going, especially among lower-track students.

*Curricular design.* The curriculum at NJHS encompasses a wide range of courses at a wide range of track levels, from AP to remedial exit exam review. But like other schools in which “college prep” classes do not actually function as preparation for college (Oakes, 2005), NJHS incorporates classes that prepare students for college in name while actually diverting them from that path. Ironically, the class called “College Study Skills” was one such class. An elective, it was filled not with students who were expected to go to college, but those who might be expected to struggle in college, or those who wanted the easiest possible class to fill their elective requirement. Henry was enrolled in this class. The first day I attended with him, I wrote in my fieldnotes: “are they learning SHORTHAND?! seems like it, or some new version. [teacher] was teaching them new abbreviations, e.g. ‘encourage’ = ‘ncrg’”. Indeed, when I later researched their textbook “SuperWrite”, I found that it is a contemporary, simplified shorthand method. Not only is this an antiquated skill – wouldn’t a typing class be more useful? – students might come to believe that taking dictation is the most effective way of taking notes, which will not serve them well in their college lectures. Instead, they need to be able to identify main ideas and analytical connections.

NJHS also has a program of “Academies”, which are two-period team-taught classes that combine an elective with a required class (like History or English) to focus on a field of interest. The academies included Media and Communications, Civics and Justice, and Applied Science. While I was at the school, these academies had about 200 students, one class each in 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. A counselor described them as intended to “bridg[e] the gap between college and the work force so they do field work and job shadowing and volunteer work projects”. For example, the Civics and Justice

academy held a mock Presidential election in 2008, and the Media and Communications academy held a clothing drive. As the counselor described to me, the academies were meant to replace vocational programs for

“that middle group that needs something to sink its teeth into. The honors kids are always fine, you know the lower kids they get all of our attention, special ed they get tons of attention. What about those kids that, maybe we could pique some interest in some certain areas and get them some practical applications, you know the interviewing skills, the presentation, you know things like that.

ADE: Is it the honors kids who are interested in the academies?

Counselor: We always, they always come down, and I kind of have to tell them like, ‘This isn’t for you.’ You know this is Level 1 rigor and the students that go in there it’s it’s on a normative curve. We have some honor’s students that drop down to come into the academy and then we have some high-functioning special ed students who can survive without in-class support, you know on either end. And then we have the level high level 2’s and the level 1’s.”

Note that this program – explicitly for the “middle group” of students, is also explicit in preparing them for a school to work transition, rather than a school to college transition and that the counselor feels she has to discourage interested honors students from participating. Indeed, as I discuss below, Gracie left the academy she loved in order to take a more college-preparatory curriculum her senior year. But it was not clear to me that students in the academies knew that they weren’t supposed to be college-bound; class discussion revolved around college as much as in any Level 1 or higher class.

*Early release.* Another institutional structure that discourages college-going is the early release program at the school. Originally designed to allow students to participate in a program where they gained credits for working or job-shadowing or to take classes at the county college, it is now primarily used by students who just don’t want to be at school anymore. A senior who has passed a complete course load in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades only has to take five classes in 12<sup>th</sup> grade: English, math, gym, and two electives. In fact,

half of my focal students got out early, with three of them carrying the minimum five classes; they were at school from 7:40 to 11:40 am every day. This is not just a by-product of the credit calculation, but is actually intentional. The director of guidance explains:

In 12<sup>th</sup> grade the students only have to carry 5 classes, so we push a lot of our students to leave early because of space. It goes back to preparing them: if you're only taking 5 classes, if you took more would you be better prepared? And there's some kids who are lacking educationally yet we still allow them out at 10:30 or whatever it is in the day which is a huge issue, but because of space that's what we're trained to do. [...] I wouldn't have a problem with it if we still had a co-op program where they were getting credits for going out working [...] but are they doing something constructive during that time period? And most of them I would say not because we have kids who leave for early release, they go to McDonald's, they go everywhere and then they come back and get on the bus to go home. So if you really had something to do you wouldn't be here getting on the bus to go home. Or there are the ones who hang out in the building because oh my friend gets out later and I need a ride. So if it had a purpose and it was used appropriately it would be better [...] but for the majority of them it's, 'Ok I don't want to be in school then I'm just leavin'.

Early release is a relief to everyone at the school because it is overcrowded. The program works: when large proportions of the senior class leave early, the halls are much less full, the school is quieter and calmer and more orderly, and since there are fewer students, teachers do not have to be staffed and paid for extra courses.

Early release thus functions, especially to low-track students, as a reward for putting in their time<sup>20</sup>. Ali, for example, wanted to get out early his senior year.

I'm glad [I have early release] uh well cuz who wants to stay in school for the whole day. I had early release last year and that was still long you know. But I'm just glad I did what all I had to do for my whole four years of you know high school to get this. Another student's mother described advising her daughter to tow the line and work hard for her first three years so she could get early release her senior year.

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<sup>20</sup> Astute observers may notice the language parallels with the prison system.

But when students have early release, they are by definition not taking courses that might prepare them for college – like extra science or math classes – or classes in which they could develop their interests or skills, like auto, art, or choir. They are also often not working. Those who sought jobs found themselves in the peak of the recession, so job searches could go on for months or even years. The school struggled with getting early release students to leave the building at the end of their day. Students liked to wander the halls, peeking in to say hi to friends or teachers who were still in class, and thus disrupting instruction.

The normal condition of having early-release students walking the halls unsupervised allowed other students to cut class and blend in. During the last week of school, I ran into a teacher in the hallway:

[She] stopped me and was like, I just had a kid come to my class in the resource room for about the 4<sup>th</sup> time this marking period, and he said to me, I really fucked up. I wasted this year, I know that I'm gonna have to do it again, but also, no one at the school stopped me. He said, I was walking the halls, nobody could find me, nobody told me to go back to class or anything. She gave me this pointed look. Thus, not only does early release contribute to less education for students who have it, but it disrupts the learning environment for the rest of the school.

Of the group of students I shadowed – and as I observed among their peers – those who had their eye on college were much less likely to seek early release, and in fact actively avoided it. Gracie told me, in the spring of her junior year, that she was dropping the Media and Communications Academy she'd enjoyed so much that year: "She doesn't want early release because it looks better for college – the academy gives you a job shadow 1 day/week which means you have early release the other 4."

Indeed, as I discuss above, the academies were not intended for the college-bound student. Gracie traded up for an extra academic class.

The only thing worse than early release, for college-bound students, was extra periods of study hall. At NJHS, lab courses like chemistry took one extra period per week for labs, so for the other four days, students are assigned to study hall. This generally entails sitting in the cafeteria or the auditorium and “doing homework”. All students are scheduled for at least one study hall, so this is another way of diverting them from academic classes that might prepare them for college. One day near the end of her junior year, Lea told me she was heading to guidance:

I asked her about why she was going to guidance and she said that her schedule has her in 3 study halls next year and she says, ‘I don’t think it looks good. If I can’t get out early I might as well learn something.’

Even after she got a schedule change, Lea still had a physics study hall four days a week, and one period early release. Everyone agreed that getting out early was preferable to being forced to stay at school for a study hall. If she had not intervened to change her schedule, she would have spent more than two hours at school in study hall, doing almost literally nothing.

*Credit calculation.* Another way the curricular structure of the school facilitates the move away from college for some students is in how it calculates credits for graduation.

Students accumulate points in each of four marking periods. They need five total points to get credit for having passed the class, for the purposes of graduation. Ten points are assigned for an A+, 9 for an A, 8 for an A-, 7 for a B+, and so on down to 1 for a D and 0 for an F. Thus, as one teacher put it, “savvy or smarmy students” can “pass for the year”

in the first marking period with a B-, and then not do any work the entire rest of the year. Hence students, like Joseph, who could tell me that “he was failing [chem.] but he’d already passed for the year so he wouldn’t have to repeat”. Low grades through the year hurt the GPA, but that only matters if students are applying to college. The school thus maximizes graduation rates while failing to motivate students to work hard in classes and toward college.

*Disruption of instruction by testing.* It’s commonly said that schools are overwhelmed with testing. NJHS was no exception, fielding the HSPA – the state graduation exam – in the fall and spring, the alternate assessment two or three times, AP exams, the PSAT, etc. All of this testing has to happen in classrooms, and it almost all happens in the morning. But it’s not often an entire class that takes any given test, and since the school does not have extra empty classrooms sitting around in the morning, classes are relocated to the library to make room. To be precise, study halls and lower-track classes are relocated. Here are notes from a lower-level math class:

We head back [...] to the library because they’re doing AP tests [in the normal classroom...] In the library this is [math] class. They’re doing a worksheet so she doesn’t have to talk too much. [ ... Teacher] complains about the library classroom – that there are 4 study halls in there, they took our whiteboard, they don’t care about classes.

Putting a math class in a big open space in the library with four other classes that are chatting, and taking away the whiteboard, sends a clear message that the instructional



content of that day's class does not matter. Low-track students may not realize that they are the only ones relocated, but it is not lost on the teachers.

The timeline of testing itself also disrupts instruction for low-track students. At NJHS, 11<sup>th</sup> graders who are believed to be at risk of failing the HSPA in either math or English are placed in HSPA-prep classes in addition to their regular courses. Such students, then, have “two maths and two Englishes” rather than getting to choose electives such as an additional science, a performing or fine arts class, or getting early release. Students can receive scores of Partial Proficiency, Proficient, or Advanced Proficiency; only the lowest category is considered not passing. At NJHS, most students pass, as shown in Appendix A, Table 4. Students who achieve Partial Proficiency are placed in remedial courses their senior year, to prepare them for re-taking the HSPA and if necessary, the SRA (a task-based alternate assessment). This comes to about 50 students in HSPA-English and about 90 in HSPA-Math their senior year.

The testing schedule is so counterintuitive and wasteful that it took me until after fieldwork, piecing together my notes and test dates I found on the internet, to figure out how it worked. Early in their senior year, I wrote to myself in fieldnotes: “I have to check out how this works – do kids who pass 1 section get to retake, otherwise they just do SRA? Do they do SRA anyway because they don't know their scores until end of semester? Confusing to me, means most of a wasted semester?”. Indeed, students in this situation do waste an extraordinary amount of class time due to the way the testing and semester schedules overlap.

The schedule unfolds as follows. 11<sup>th</sup> graders take the HSPA for the first time in March. Most pass, but they do not receive their scores until June. Students who have been

enrolled in remedial courses, therefore, now have three full months of instruction in a test-prep course after the test has been given. HSPA Language Arts classes transition to Film Analysis, and HSPA Math classes to life skills such as calculating one's taxes, with widely varying success depending on the teacher.

Students who do not pass either or both subjects of the HSPA will be enrolled for their senior year in a HSPA/SRA remedial class for the appropriate subject. They re-take the HSPA in October, which means they actually only have about a month of instruction beforehand. Immediately afterward, they begin preparing for the SRA, because even though most of them will pass the HSPA on their second try, they won't get results back until the first week of January. At that point, those who pass will bide their time a few more weeks until the end of the semester in late January, when they will transfer to a study hall or an elective class. Still, they've wasted nearly three months of instruction on test-prep for a test they will never take.

Students who do not pass the HSPA on the second try take the SRA starting the first week of January (it is administered over a two or three week period). January proves a particularly stressful time to get everything completed before the deadline because they have to contend with snow days; teachers have to make the call in the morning whether testing will go forward as scheduled despite snow delays, and snow cancellations mean postponing to another day.

Students then immediately begin studying for the 3<sup>rd</sup> administration of the HSPA, which they all take in early March, because even though yet again most will have passed the SRA already, scores won't be returned until late March. As soon as the 3<sup>rd</sup> HSPA is over, they begin studying for the 2<sup>nd</sup> SRA, administered in April. If they get passing first-

round SRA scores back in the mean time, they can transfer to a study hall. Otherwise, they take the SRA in April, leaving them another six weeks of time in a test-prep class after all tests have been completed. By this time classes are very small; the English class had only two bored and sad students, and Math had about a dozen (down from 15 English and 34 Math students in January). All they do is wait for their scores, which will be returned (for both the 3<sup>rd</sup> HSPA and the 2<sup>nd</sup> SRA) in the first week of June, in time for graduation. Even students are under no illusions about the instructional value of the classes, by late April:

Ali comes in this period and says that they're just doing SRA math so he can come [interview with me]. I asked him if he knows if he passed the SRA and he says he still has to do the last task and get his results back. Though this is his last chance to pass in order to graduate, he would still rather chat with me than prepare.

All the waiting around grates on students and teachers alike; these classes were the most painful ones for me to sit through<sup>21</sup>. Teachers openly commiserated with students about the prep worksheets and drills students were given, which by the end of the year they did not even pretend to complete. One day before Christmas break, the teacher had (implausibly) expected SRA scores to be returned, so she did not plan a lesson. They are, she says, “just sitting around” for the period. In the midst of the monotony and boredom, it is easy to forget that high school graduation hinges on the results. The teacher suggested that students could pop in after school to get their scores, but she would only be there for 5 minutes, because she was heading home for a nap to prepare for a big night

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<sup>21</sup> The overlapping test dates and score reports also contribute to significant confusion on the part of students. Rishi, for example, reported to me in December that he failed the 2<sup>nd</sup> HSPA, even though scores weren't back yet.

out. Otherwise, she said, “you’ll have to wait till Monday to get them.” Indeed, Rishi – anxious for his results – and I rushed to talk to her after school, but at 6 minutes after the last bell, the classroom was locked and dark.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the testing takes teachers away from their normal classrooms both to train for SRA administration and scoring, and to administer the test. In either case, substitutes cover their classes, which means little to no instructional work happens. Several teachers at NJHS missed three days with their classes in December to go to in-service training, and then again several days in January for administration.

*County Is Just as Good, but It’s Not Just as Good*

The school is careful to present all post-secondary education, on its face, as comparable and legitimate. Teachers at NJHS spend a lot of time assuring students that it is a viable option. Indeed, I regularly heard teachers encouraging students that County was a *preferable* option for completing basic requirements cheaply before transferring. NJHS goes to some lengths to equalize, in discourse, vocational school, county college, and four-year colleges. For example, like many schools, NJHS has college officials do lunchroom visits, where interested students can find out more. At NJHS in 2009, a wide

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<sup>22</sup> Contrast this with an honors teacher who agreed to email interim grades to her students over the weekend; those grades only counted marginally toward a report card grade, and yet the class collectively agreed on the necessity of knowing them immediately. See footnote 17.

range of schools had lunchroom visits, from Army to Rider to Morehouse<sup>23</sup>. Even the Paul Mitchell Partner Salon was recruiting new students; their current students were doing girls' hair at their table at the back of the room.

Likewise, teachers speak carefully about different post-secondary options in order to make them seem equally legitimate, if not equivalent. A social studies teacher in an in-class-support classroom explained his pedagogical approach to me:

1<sup>st</sup> marking period they focused on primary sources, political cartoons. 2nd marking period they worked together [...]. Now it's 3<sup>rd</sup> marking period and he said he knows it's not an upper level class but 'I think everyone should do a research project whether they're going to County or Harvard'. He likes to keep expectations high and let them rise to it, and if they don't then ok. But [the in-class support teacher] likes to build the floor 'so we work together on that'. This discourse assumes all students are going to college, and frames their curriculum as preparing students equally for either County or Harvard.

School officials also advise students that credits at different colleges are interchangeable, ignoring the risk that credits will not transfer, the extraordinarily low completion and transfer rates from county colleges, as well as any qualitative difference in the courses themselves. In a science class, I overhear a boy talking with his teacher:

[The teacher] is saying, 'Well if you take general courses you'll be ok, or if you take courses you might be interested in at half the cost.' [...] They're talking about how to take science courses at a community college that will transfer.

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<sup>23</sup> The complete list was: Alvernia University, Army, Delaware Valley College, DeSales University, East Stroudsburg University, Kean University, Kings College, Lock Haven University, Manhattan College, Massachusetts College, Monmouth University, Morehouse College, Paul Mitchell Partner Salon, University of New Haven, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rider University, Sacred Heart University, St Johns University, SUNY Albany, Towson University, Western New England College. See Appendix D for a table of NJ colleges; no out-of-state college got more than a handful of matriculates from NJHS.

Taking courses for general interest at half the cost might well be good advice, but even basic general education courses will not necessarily transfer. (Just ask the transfer student in my freshman writing class this semester; Rutgers only took 32 of his 75 credits.) Because of the college-for-all discourse, school officials are quite reluctant to point out these risks even when they know about them.

At the same time, there is a loud and clear unspoken message that different college options are obviously NOT equal. For example, it was common to hear counselors say to students, ‘Your diploma doesn’t say County then Rutgers, it just says Rutgers.’ While spoken to assure students that County is a viable option, it simultaneously draws a clear line distinction between the two options; no one, it is implied, would want a diploma that DID say County. This is because everyone knows that County is not actually just as good as a four-year college, even if they are reluctant to point it out. In fact, a counselor describes fostering the impression among weak students that “acceptance” into county college is meaningful:

[...with Rishi] we were wondering about the learning disabilities and his language arts teacher has been wondering about it, and anyway, she says he’s going to County, he’s all set there. He has to take the ESL placement test there again. She said he came in; he was all excited. She said, ‘To him that was an acceptance letter’, and she said, ‘I don’t tell them that it’s open admissions’.

Thus, the counselor fosters the impression for the student that he has been accepted to college, while privately acknowledging that the acceptance doesn’t even really ‘count’.

Less commonly, the lower status of county college is expressed bluntly: “At the cafeteria table they asked me if I like Rutgers, if I dorm there. Lea says her parents ‘won’t let me go to County.’”

Lea's father is insistent that the first person in the family to go to college should go somewhere better than County, a place that would prepare her to be the boss and not the worker.

*Allowing Different Levels of Knowledge and Discourse in Different Tracks*

A final way the school promotes no-college-for-some is through allowing different tracks to offer very different informal knowledge of the college application process. The school allows misinformed student discourse, in particular, in lower tracks. Sometimes this misinformed discourse happens because teachers or counselors themselves are misinformed – that is, they relay or allow students to relay incorrect information. Alternatively, they simply fail to correct or intervene when students talk among themselves. They allow students to share incorrect information, or fail to address questions.

For example, in a senior Math 4 class (the lowest track, below Algebra) the class somehow gets into a discussion about the recent tsunami in Chile. One girl announced, apparently in response, “Well I passed science. I’m going to be majoring in science”. This senior cannot even specify what sort of “science” class she took – likely the lowest track “Environmental Sciences” class – or what sort of “science” she plans to major in. The teacher does not challenge or pursue discussion with her about this.

A similar lack of specificity in college planning can be seen with Ali, another low-track student who wishes to pursue training in medicine. When he was a junior, I asked him if he thought about life after high school. He told me,

Well I wanted to go into a medical trade school. I want to be a doctor. Umm I'm gonna try, you know, to try to get my nursing, you know, so I can be a medical assistant. Gonna try to get my certificate for that and then after that when I actually get a job for nursing, then I'll probably go to college part time to you know become a full on doctor but I'll be able to pay for it myself you know. I, I, yeah I think a lot about my future and what I want to do."

Ali may think a lot about his future, but he clearly has not discussed these plans with a knowledgeable adult who could help him understand the sequencing of his desired post-secondary education, nor the ways in which being a medical assistant does not prepare one for becoming a doctor.

In contrast, here is an extended example of high-track students who both want to be nurses. They have family connections in medical jobs, though their parents – all immigrants – work in occupations ranked lower in prestige than nursing. These students do have detailed knowledge about the certification, degree, and employment opportunities available to them as nursing students:

Robin: Or you could just do County

Jorge: I don't wanna go to County

Robin: Either do I but my mom's trying to make me

Audrey: Really?

Robin: Cuz I got into that NJ Stars program, so I can go there for 2 years for free and then I'll transfer two for free

Jorge: The problem is you have to pass your RN, you have to pass your  
[...]

Robin: No! You don't get an RN, because you finish in 4 years, with a BSN  
[...]

Jorge: You get your RN with 2 years from County. That's why it's called RN to BSN. You switch from Associate's degree to Bachelors. But you've already taken your NCLEX. But you have to pass it to transfer

Robin: Weird

Jorge: That's the problem with it, cuz what if it's too late



Robin: Or what if you don't pass it  
 Jorge: Yeah, then you just wasted a year, have to wait till next year, so you're sitting at home for a year  
 Audrey: That's just a problem for nursing then  
 Jorge: Yeah cuz to pass the associate's degree you have to pass the NCLEX  
 Audrey: Is NCLEX the nursing?  
 Robin: The license  
 Jorge: Yeah. So you're already gonna have your license but only Associate's degree  
 Robin: And they don't really hire anyone without their BSN  
 Jorge: Unless they really need a nurse  
 Audrey: Well they do really need nurses but you can make more money, get a better job?  
 Jorge: They're not gonna promote you. [pause] I want universal health care!  
 Robin and Jorge know what Ali doesn't, including the tradeoffs to starting at County

College, what the BA versus the AA degrees do for one's career, what licensing means and the timeline on which it happens. Jorge names particular and specific reasons why Robin might not want to start at the county college. Note that Robin and Jorge have sought this elaborated or personalized knowledge on their own – from their friends or family networks – not from their counselors, who likely would not be familiar with the details of nursing licensing<sup>24</sup>. Yet someone with even a basic understanding of post-secondary planning would be able to tell Ali that his plan to work through “college” for medical school part-time was a fundamental misunderstanding of the normal sequence of schooling, and highly unrealistic.

The school promotes these different track cultures by how it responds to student queries, and how it provides information to students. A good example is a discussion during a Child Growth & Development class discussion about giving birth. This class

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<sup>24</sup> This serves also to highlight the deficiencies of the knowledge of most counselors for specific post-secondary plans. On the face of it, going to County for free for two years to get your RN, then transferring for the Bachelor's degree for free, sounds like an excellent deal.

counted as a consumer sciences credit, and so was one of few classes in the school that was truly un-tracked. Honors students mixed with Level 2 students here. One day, the class was discussing how much it cost to give birth.

Girl: ‘What, do you pay it off like college?’

Teacher: ‘Well hopefully you have insurance.’

[Senior girl] asked if she could be a makeup artist (for which she says she’s going to college, not cosmetology school) and an obstetrician on the side. Discussion moves on to next topic.

The teacher evades the student’s assumption that college is something one “pays off”, missing the opportunity to talk about the various ways college might be funded, and the various ways it might be “paid off”. The teacher also misses the opportunity to talk about how career trajectories work, and how unrealistic it is to become an “obstetrician on the side”.

Contrast this with the specific advice Ken received from his AP Government teacher:

Um I wanted early release but like I thought about it and then Mr. Conable like advised us like oh um, people who get early releases, like colleges will look at that and it will affect you in how you apply. So I kinda just thought about that.

While taking an early release or not in their senior year is not the subject matter proper of a Government class, the AP teacher sees it as his responsibility to help prepare students and advise them for their college applications. Such advice – though minor – can have important effects. Ken, for example, decided to double up on science courses (Physics Honors and AP Computer Science) instead of taking the early release his senior year. This likely benefitted his application for the Rutgers School of Engineering.

MIXED MESSAGES ALLOW PARADOXICAL POST-SECONDARY GUIDANCE  
TO THRIVE

In this chapter, I have shown how NJHS simultaneously supports and undermines a college-for-all message. By literally giving mixed messages; by equivocating about the relative value of different colleges; by allowing different college-planning discourse across tracks; and through the intended and unintended consequences of its institutional structures, NJHS sends the message that college is for everyone, but not everyone should go to college. A plethora of counterproductive institutional practices bolster this paradoxical message.

At NJHS, school officials generally believe in college-for-all. Certainly, they believe that college is usually the best option, and students should be encouraged toward it as much as possible. Yet, it was impossible for them to ignore the fact that the majority of their students were not going on to four-year colleges. This presented a cognitive dissonance that they ended up managing in a way they might not, on reflection, be happy with.

My argument is thus not simply that guidance counselors are failing some students at the school, but rather that students within one school effectively experience very different school cultures [similar to the ways in which Oakes (2005) describes tracking]. Because the school officially promulgates a college-for-all message, most students *feel* that they have college plans. When those plans don't work out, it's easy for the students to blame themselves. But the plans were not all created equal, and some students' plans are more concrete, specific, appropriate, and achievable than others. In particular, one thing I find problematic about the college-for-all paradigm is that it allows counselors and teachers to avoid facing post-secondary outcome data. When they blithely encourage students to go to two-year colleges, they do not have to know that only 13% of

their C and D students will complete two-year degrees in six years (Rosenbaum, 2001). They can thus sidestep difficult conversations with students, evading giving advice that is hard to hear. This leaves students with insufficient or unrealistic plans, but the blame is laid a year or more down the road. Insufficient plans also contribute to the problem of “misaligned ambitions” (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), students who do not know how to get to where they think they want to be. Mixed messages bolster misaligned ambitions, because they plaster platitudes over inequalities in college preparation and access, and thus leave most students with unrealistic and vague semi-plans for college.

Furthermore, student experience at NJHS is massaged so that the few students who do not plan to go on to college think they are doing so out of personal choice. This too funnels the blame back on individuals, rather than the school culture which failed to adequately prepare them, or on the place they occupy in structural hierarchy (for example, low-track students who have little money for college and whose parents did not attend college either). When students hear mixed messages, they hear themselves being sorted by school officials. College-bound students are encouraged to make status distinctions between themselves and those “lower” in the hierarchy. Further status distinctions are made between those attending four-year colleges, two-year colleges, or no college. Though officially “college is college”, everyone actually knows that County is not as good as Harvard. So when teachers say things like this to students, students feel patronized or learn to tune the message out as not intended for them.

One might wonder whether – and certainly people have argued that – there is a silver lining to this approach. Encouraging college-for-all might make a student aspire to something they otherwise would not have thought of as an option. And it is true that each

completed year of higher education increases lifetime earnings, so from an economic standpoint it is important to guide teens in that direction. It is likely that the college-for-all approach has helped some students go to college who might not otherwise have done so. One reason college-for-all is so popular is that it does, indeed, benefit some students, particularly as higher education is the only reliable way to improve one's lot in life.

Social commentators often find this an unequivocal good. Yet we also know that completion rates are falling and time-to-degree is increasing, largely due to unprepared students entering the pipeline (Hout, 2008). The reality is that many of these students take on debt for highly unrealistic goals. This is rough on teens psychosocially, and it is also rough on our national budget as we prepare for massive defaults on federally subsidized student loans (Martin and Lehen, 2012; Pope, 2011).

One thing that is clear from my research, then, is that we collectively are doing a very poor job of preparing our students for realistic post-secondary plans. We use the language of college-for-all, while failing the majority of our students who are not going to attend four-year colleges. We imply to students that it's easy and obvious to go to college – but when it *isn't* so easy for them, we look the other way.

The other important theoretical point that my research highlights is the complex role that the school plays in pushing some students into college and some away from it, in its ability to simultaneously undermine and support college prospects. The sociology of education literature does not sufficiently develop this complexity, though we do see other instances. For example, Fine (1991) explores the “cross purposes” pushing the majority of the students in a school to drop out, and Carr & Kefalas (2010) show how schools can

prepare students for outcomes that are ironically detrimental to their communities. If we look carefully, we will probably find similar dynamics in other cases<sup>25</sup>.

This chapter has laid out an argument about the messages NJHS sends to its students. In Chapter 4, I explore how students receive this message. I discuss how they experience the process of “sorting” in school, and how that process – which is different in various social locations within the school – contributes to their evaluations of their own post-secondary futures and their plans.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, Khan (2011) approaches such a description of “difficult” students in elite settings.

## Chapter 4: We don't keep score, but we do

### THE PARADOX

Just as there is a basic paradox shaping the institutional response to post-secondary preparation (Chapter 3: Everyone should go to college, but college isn't for everyone), there is a basic paradox shaping the daily lives of students within the school institution. If Chapter 3 addresses the messages the school sends, this chapter addresses the receipt and negotiation of those messages – how students hear, internalize, and interpret those messages, and how they use them to evaluate their own post-secondary options. The paradox of the receiving end goes something like, “We don't keep score, but we do”. Students live in a world in which they have been taught – sometimes rather forcefully – that everyone is equally worthy, that they are all intrinsically worthy (Twenge, 2012), a world in which they are not to bully or scramble for the top spot because everyone has a spot. The class of 2010 has heard the message that not only *should* everyone go to college, but that there is a college out there for everyone. So they learn, as children's coaches remind them, that “We don't keep score.” But of course we *do* keep score, and *they* do keep score. Failing to report the score aloud or in writing does not mean that we don't keep track of it in our heads as best we can. The decision by many high schools not to report the full list of every college acceptance for every senior is a symptom of this paradox: it simply becomes unacceptably competitive, unacceptably explicit, to publish those details. And yet the competition lives on, among friends and perhaps especially among parents. In this milieu, it's no wonder that teens have a hard

time figuring out their place, because they don't know in what company they are allowed to explore it explicitly, in what contexts they must pretend that the competition isn't even going on. During high school, they learn how to manage these subtle but important status games, and the lessons they learn help them place themselves vis-à-vis college. This chapter explores how they do it.

*Vignette: Antonio Misses the No-College-For-Some Paradox*

Because the process of place-setting is usually implicit, students who are not savvy enough miss the paradoxes that other students struggle with. Antonio, a moody but caring boy who describes himself as half Puerto Rican and half Italian, Polish, and Russian, is one such student who never makes the connection that college is not a reasonable option for him. He is a classified student (i.e., has a classified learning disability) who ekes by in the lowest track classes. Antonio knows he's not very good at math. I asked him why he was taking Math 4<sup>26</sup> his senior year:

Antonio: it's a lower math, it's not like Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, it's not like that

ADE: ok, and how come you're in that class?

Antonio: because I don't know like the formulas for like Algebra, like I don't know, like find the value of x or y, like I don't know how to. I mean the teacher will explain it to me but I still won't get it. So that's why I'm in that class.

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<sup>26</sup> At NJHS, academic courses are explicitly tracked, from highest to lowest track: AP, Honors, Level 1, Level 2, HSPA/SRA (remedial classes for the high school exit exam). Not every subject has every level, especially AP. Math 4 is the Level 2 math class for seniors (Math 3 for juniors, etc).



But in most ways, Antonio is not very good at evaluating his own ability. His counselor told me he was even exempted from taking the HSPA<sup>27</sup>, but when I asked him about it, he told me he took it:

I got exempt from it, I failed the English and the math but since I have IEP I got exempt from taking it, but I was close, you needed I think like a 200 to pass the English and a 300 to pass the math. I got a 143 on the English, on the math I know I got a 110. But on the English part, I'm like how the hell did I fail? I did the pre-writing, I wrote down like what I'm gonna write, I wrote down the title, I underlined the title, and the HSPA they give you two pages front and back, I did that. Antonio is mistaken about a number of things: for example, 200 is the passing score on each section, but more important is the fact that he does not understand why he failed the English section. He believes he fulfilled all the requirements, as described by his teachers.

Thus, Antonio hears the message that he has learning disabilities and is in low-track classes. He hears that the school does not think he is capable of passing the high school exit exam. But he also hears the message in most of his classes that he should be applying to college. He is not savvy enough to pick up on the implicit message that college might not be the right place for him, and so he eagerly plans to attend Lincoln Tech (where his mom attends) for a computer-related program. Then Antonio's mom

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<sup>27</sup> The HSPA (pronounced 'hespa') is the state High School Proficiency Exam, a high stakes exam with Reading and Math which students take in the spring of 11<sup>th</sup> grade. If they fail, they have chances to retake in the fall, spring, and summer of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, when they also begin the alternative SRA, Special Review Assessment, a project-based assessment graded by students' teachers. Students can graduate from high school via either method. This is the NCLB-evaluated exam in the state, and thus low passing rates can penalize the school. The SRA process was overhauled in the face of long term, widespread criticism for being too easy during the 2009-2010 school year, and overhauled again afterward; it is now called the Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA).

heard some computer students at Lincoln Tech complaining that they weren't learning much, so she suggested that he go to the county college instead.

I had an extended conversation with Antonio's counselor (Fieldnotes, 5/28/2010). She was extremely concerned about his future, worried that he'll "get swept down the vortex", and felt she had no opportunity to suggest different plans. She told me that he has a depressed IQ, but more than that he's not good at "the social stuff". He's not skilled at reading body language and reading other people's social cues. She believes that he'll be taking remedial courses at County College for the next 10 years. Instead, he should be doing some sort of trade or training program instead, like working at Lowe's where you have to know where all the paint chips are and be very organized. She says, "I knew guys from my neighborhood who were similar to Antonio and they knew all the stock, cuz it was very repetitious and they kept their shops extremely clean and they ran really great businesses. He could do something like that."

The counselor thinks that "in a perfect world" she and other counselors would not have been so "PC"; they would have brainstormed together for other programs and given him a skills test, which she was trained to administer but has never given in a high school because it costs several hundred dollars each. She thinks, ideally, this test should be a standard component of working with special ed kids. But, she says, "I have 280 kids on my caseload. In a perfect world I would have 125 and I would be able to manage that with him." I wondered whether Antonio would have listened to this advice. She said, "If we could've not been so politically correct, if we had been able to sit down with him and say, *Think about it. You have a lot of trouble with trigonometry. You need trigonometry for computers. College is not for everybody.*"

I accompanied Antonio to a meeting at the County College in May – he needed a ride, having failed the written driver’s exam a handful of times, and his mom was at school – to see if he could get testing accommodations for his placement test. The counselor allowed him extra time on the essay, which is the only timed part, and a calculator for the math. She began setting him up to expect some developmental courses. Antonio couldn’t remember the name of his intended major – “computer or engineering or something” – but when the counselor finally found it, she reported it was a four-semester sequence that started at Pre-Calculus. She told Antonio that was “kind of bad news for you” because he had never taken Algebra in high school, so he would probably have to take some significant developmental classes in math first. This counselor was extremely patient, helpful, and clear about the difficult pathway Antonio would need to take. I read between the lines and felt discouraged for him, but the counselor never explicitly advised him against this course of action, and he did not pick up on the implicit message. He left the office excited about making his first concrete step toward college, with instructions in hand for placement testing and registration.

Ultimately, no one ever sat Antonio down and told him that his plan was not feasible. Because he was not good at reading social cues, he missed the implicit message that college was not for him, and he embarked on an expensive pathway on which no one thought he would succeed. Indeed, when I met up with him for lunch the following summer, he told me that he failed four developmental courses in the fall and did not return for the spring semester.

*Figuring Out Where You Fit: The Future Is Open, but It's Not*

Antonio is at the extreme end of the phenomenon I discuss in this chapter. But the basic dilemma he faces is the same one facing the other students in the middle 80% at NJHS: how to figure out where they fit in vis-à-vis their peers, and then how that maps on to their post-secondary futures. This is a difficult task for most of them, made much more difficult by the fact that they live in a college-for-all era in which few adults will tell them straightforwardly what their place is. Joseph (recently declassified; middle of his class; Egyptian, Irish and Polish) is a typical example. I asked him, in the fall of his senior year, if he had thought about specific colleges to apply to. He said, “Possibly Rutgers. I wanted to go somewhere in New York but uh, like near the city, but doesn’t seem like I’ve been having much luck with finding a good school there. Like either schools are too high for me and like too expensive, or they’re just too below my standards. I can’t find a happy medium for myself”. Note how vaguely he characterizes the status both of himself *and* the schools he is talking about. When he says New York schools are “too high” for him, does he mean in terms of admissions standards (GPA and SAT), or something else? What does he mean by “too below” his standards? He knows he wants a school in the middle, but has a hard time vocalizing in the middle of *what*. It is clear to Joseph that he actually *can’t* go anywhere he wants, but he keeps hearing that he can do whatever he wants with his life. I argue that this is a symptom of a system in which few are willing to straightforwardly talk about relative status of colleges and students, and it leaves students awash in a sea of vagueness in which they are expected to somehow create solid ground.

In spite of this sea of vagueness, or perhaps because of it, students constantly engaged in the process of comparing and sorting each other along a range of distinctions. They rated themselves against their friends, they rated their friends against each other, they sorted their peers into groups. And yet they were in a school context in which everyone was meant to be inclusive and non-judgmental, a place where “we don’t use labels”, as a student said. What happens then is that everything becomes conflated, a big mush of multiple complicated variables that are difficult to disentangle, and even trickier to navigate in social interaction. Sometimes those variables get reduced into what is apparently a single post-secondary continuum (like Joseph’s “too high” or “too below”). This places students (and teachers, too) in a tricky, ambiguous place, where they don’t quite know how to rank and sort each other (and thereby place themselves in the hierarchy). As teens learn how to talk about status and comparison, they are also learning which variables can be discussed straightforwardly, in which contexts, and which require euphemisms. Can one explicitly talk about the level of difficulty of the work in an Honors class compared to a HSPA class? Can one talk about being smarter or dumber than other students? Can one talk about being more or less hard-working or lazy than other students? Do the answers differ when one is “on” or “off” the record?

The answers to these questions vary, both because the sorting process itself is complex, and because students are still figuring out how to do it right. Figuring out how to compare oneself to one’s peers, however, is not a simple or straightforward task. Students are learning how to talk about hierarchies, they are learning how to talk *around* hierarchies, and they are learning how to talk about it in subtle ways. Thus the comparisons I heard in school were often complex, contradictory, implicit, and explicit.

But the process is important, because one of the ways students evaluate their own post-secondary options, and make decisions about what appropriate futures are for themselves, comes out of how they learn to position themselves vis-à-vis others at school. They learn to place themselves in hierarchies (of how smart and hardworking they are, in particular), and then using their place in these hierarchies, evaluate their post-secondary options.

This explicit place-setting happens around the edges; in general people at the school are careful to talk about students' futures as if they were open. Teachers frequently addressed their classes across all tracks as if they were all going to college (as I discuss in Chapter 3). But Ken, a mostly-AP student, reports to me that his teachers helped him contextualize his college chances: "This class, chances are you probably gonna go to Rutgers and [...] if you do well in your class pretty much like you'll do well in Rutgers and that's what they're preparing you for. Whereas like other classes you just fool around and I think those are the classes where like some people are in all of those classes and then when they go to college they get stomped, like oh my god, I'm not prepared for this".

*The hierarchies are vague, but they're also clear.* Foucault reminds us that sorting and classifying is intrinsic to the contemporary educational endeavor, which functions "like a learning machine, but also a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle dreamt of a classroom in which the spatial distribution might provide a whole series of distinctions at once: according to the pupils' progress, worth, character, application, cleanliness and parents' fortune" (Foucault, 1995 [1975]). Producing an appropriately disciplined student entails "*a whole series of distinctions at once*": we want

to order students according to their ability *and* their hard work *and* their college potential *and* their school manners. At NJHS, because no one wants to make each of these distinctions clear on their own, they all become conflated into one messy continuum (again, Joseph's "too high" or "too below"), and it becomes quite difficult to sort them all out again.

A basic example might make this more clear. Some relevant variables for sorting at NJHS include the academic track level, the school-orientation and compliance of students, and race. Now, NJHS is an unusually diverse school, so what might appear as a single continuum in other less diverse schools becomes problematized at NJHS. For example, at schools with only black and white students, it would be typical to see the highest tracks have the highest proportion of white students, gradually decreasing until the lowest tracks which had the highest proportion of black students. At NJHS, every class in every track has a diversity of races – so much so that tracking along racial lines can be ignored. Yet it is not lost on anyone at the school that Honors and AP tracks are filled with Indian, Asian, and white kids (especially girls). Low tracks are filled with black and Spanish kids, disaffected white boys, and the occasional Indian or Asian immigrant whose English isn't up to speed yet. When someone *wants* to notice racialized tracking, it is easy to point out. On one occasion, a teacher joked with Dan (high track, Jamaican and Portuguese) that "You are the only black kid in my class for Level 1". He asked about another black kid, and she replied, "He's 11<sup>th</sup> [period]. That's his job 11<sup>th</sup>!". In other words, there are so few black kids in Level 1 that the teacher has mentally assigned the "slot" to one kid per class. Dan's "job" is to be "the black kid" in Level 1 during period 3; some other kid gets that job period 11. Race and track level have become

conflated at NJHS but in a very complex way. Add in even just school-orientation and compliance, and the picture becomes exponentially more complicated.

The point is that, paradoxically, the poles are relatively clear to both teachers and students, but it is less clear what the continuum is. The norms at school in some ways prevent making explicit hierarchies, especially in claiming intelligence. The result is that the comparisons constantly shift and morph. At one moment, a student might claim that the only difference between track levels is the amount of homework, and at the next a student might look to a higher track to “find someone smart” to help them understand a concept. In particular, students elide intelligence with hard work, which is much more acceptable to talk about openly. Students are much more willing to claim “hard work” than to claim “smartness” or “intelligence” for themselves.

Students have difficulty discussing their own placement in the tracks. For example, I asked Ken how he got in to Physics Honors (the highest level) his senior year. He told me, “Physics, they kinda just put me there. Cuz like my friend, we had like the same schedule last year but he got put in Level 1 just because it didn’t fit his schedule now. So it was kinda by like luck that you go to Level 1 or Honors, but usually they stick you in Honors if you’ve been doing ok in your science classes”. Mike explained that that he is taking Trig as a senior because he’s just in “normal math”, so it’s “the basic class that you take cuz it’s Pre-Algebra, Geometry, Algebra, and then Trig”.

At times, it almost seemed that students did not understand the tracking system and how placement works. But they demonstrate that understanding quite clearly at other times, when they need to. This indicates that students downplay their own understanding of where they fit in the academic hierarchy so as to attempt to erase what might be seen



as differences in intelligence, especially when comparing to lower tracks. For example, Jorge tells me near the end of the year: “I have good grades but I would’ve done, I think I would’ve been better in school if I wanted to. Like especially now, I think I would’ve been, I think I could’ve been easily in Honors classes. Like especially now like maturity, my maturity level is better now than it was in the beginning. Like I regret not being in Honors classes. Just I’ve been in level 1 the whole time. Like right now in Physics, my marking period grades are 96, 96, 97, and then, I have a 100 average right now”. Jorge thus attributes his good grades to maturity and hard work rather than intelligence.

Students seem to attribute the main difference between tracks to the amount of work that is required, which parallels nicely with their wanting to discuss how hard they work rather than how intelligent they are. Talking about the differences in levels as if the main difference is about how much work is required or how hard students work allows students to sidestep differences in ability. For example, Mike told me he never wanted to take AP classes “because it’s just too much work required. [...] like I I’ve thought about it, back in Freshmen year like you know trying to do this one thing where I’d be Level 1 English, which you know I got to and then be like alright then I’m gonna do Honors English, you know cuz that would be pretty good, you know? You get college credits and stuff like that and then I was thinking about it and I thought why? AP and Level 1 are almost the same it’s just the work, you get more work”. Later in the year, though, Mike decided even Level 1 is too much work and drops down to Level 2 English. He told me, in January, he could be late for that class because it’s Level 2, that he is doing very little in the class and is still passing. Now that his college applications have been sent off, he sees little point in working hard in high school.

As students sort themselves against their peers, I believe part of what is happening is their attempt to protect themselves from the psychosocial harm that might occur if they are placed or if they place themselves inaccurately<sup>28</sup>. Henry, for example, is at the center of a tension involving his parents' expectations, his status as a member of a model minority, and his low academic achievement. He wants to be the sort of person who will become a doctor, and his parents and his reading of race relations tell him he can be. But his work in school and his track level tell him he can't. His constant misrepresentations – to himself, to me, and to his peers – are an attempt to mitigate the psychosocial pressures he feels. That is the coping mechanism he has developed, and one can't help but wonder what will happen when he can't sustain the lies any longer. Other students have different coping mechanisms; for example Mike protects himself from possible academic failure in high track classes by choosing to take it easy and relax for the second half of his senior year. They take on these coping mechanisms as a way to ensure that they haven't rated themselves too highly. Of course, one cannot rate oneself too low, either, because of the tremendous pressure for everyone to go to college and the widespread (if rarely explicit) belief about the worthlessness of students in the lowest tracks (which I discuss below, see "Honors nerds and bad kids").

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<sup>28</sup> There is an article that claims that no lasting psychological harm comes to students who "overshoot" in their high school aspirations and fail to attain them. The article argued that we might as well encourage college-for-all, because it resulted in high self-esteem in the short term and no lasting negative consequences. I sure wish I remembered who wrote that article, because I see negative consequences of the college-for-all strategy.

*Ambiguity and mistakes.* Placing oneself along the continuum I've been discussing isn't a straightforward task, and it's not easy for everyone. Jorge, for example, acts differently with different groups of people at school – so much so that when I shadowed him, teachers and students described him to me in surprisingly contradictory ways. His junior year, he was a good student in Level 1 classes. At lunch the first day I followed him, I was surprised that his lunch friends seemed much more cool/jock than I thought he was. His friends teased him about doing homework. He protested that this is the first lunch he'd done homework at. Later, Jorge explains that "I'm half Filipino half Spanish. You can put me in like two groups, because I'm like, I can be with, I don't want to say ghetto, but I can be with the ghetto crowd but at the same time I can be with the smart honors students".

Sometimes students mistakenly place others, too – and they might or might not ever realize their mistakes. One day Gracie was making fun of the tennis banquet, which was scheduled to be held right next door to the charity dodgeball tournament. She was joking that the noisy dodgeball tournament threatened to disrupt the relatively serene and formal tennis banquet. But Jorge, sitting next to her, chimed in that he's attending that banquet. Jorge does not take her ridicule as an irreparable faux pas, and they work out logistics on the noise problem. The next year, I chat with Melina while I wait outside Gracie's first period class. She says that Gracie wasn't there yesterday either – "probably some college thing". Later, Gracie tells me she was just playing hooky. Thus, we have Gracie inadvertently classifying Jorge as less "nerdy" than he is, and Melina inadvertently classifying Gracie as more "nerdy" than she is. These errors are important because they indicate that students are making assumptions about other students' college

plans – assumptions that help students evaluate their own place in the hierarchy – and when those assumptions are wrong, they might impact what students think of as possible futures.

*Paradox in the social milieu: my friends are just like me, but we're all different.* The same processes that make it difficult for students to sort themselves are at play in the social world. Students are extremely proud to attend such a diverse high school (one tells me I should use the pseudonym “United Nations High School”), and enjoy telling me that all their friends are different. And yet, when I asked more specifically about friends, students often told me that their friends were all basically like them. One day, sitting on the bleachers outside during gym class, I was chatting with a girl I’d never met before. She told me that she mostly takes honors classes and knows honors kids, and so we agree that we probably don’t know the same juniors.

At times, the social and the academic hierarchies get conflated, at least in part because friendship groups tend to be organized by track, with just enough variation that students can ignore that fact or pretend it’s not true (the same as with racialized tracking of classrooms). Students know which track they are in, and are generally but not necessarily in the same track across subjects. Robin explains how far apart the social worlds can be. She dropped from Honors to Level 1 in most of her classes her senior year. She found herself suddenly out of her “comfort zone ... it was so hard to adjust to it and it’s like weird cuz you miss everyone, I feel so distant from everyone. It’s like a fish out of water kind of thing, cuz my level some of like people in the classes are kind of questionable, like why are you not in jail yet. Like people I have never seen, they’re in

my class. I kinda miss those people [in Honors]... it feels like it's another different world". Mike feels similarly about the difference between Level 1 and Level 2: "I don't wanna take Math [Level 2] because I think that would have been too easy, and you know I think that would've been a really distracting class especially with some of the kids who take it, you know not exactly the brightest stars". Mike and Robin's comments both tap in to an important reality about the how the social and academic hierarchies at NJHS are conflated and not easy to untangle.

The development of cliques at the school mirror this process. Universally, students claim not to be part of a clique, or to flow seamlessly between cliques. Some even claim that there are no cliques. But most students are able to name them, and they tend to be organized along the same muddy continuum that all other comparisons are organized around. For example, Gracie told me: "Oh yeah well I think the intelligence levels tend to gravitate towards each other. Like the stupid kids, then you have the stoners and ... but no I don't think I belong to one".

*Honors nerds versus bad kids.* Socially, students at NJHS make clear distinctions among the different tracks. "Honors nerds" are teased, usually in a good-natured way. For example, a teacher comments to a Level 1 class that an Honors kid emailed her and said she wasn't right about something. She exclaims to the students, "Who's teaching the class?!" Another teacher asked for a show of hands of who got all the questions right on a quiz. One Asian boy raises his hand; the teacher calls him a nerd. This teasing revolves around the central premise that Honors or AP courses are less fun and that students in them have no social life. Jorge tells me one day that his calculus class is Level 1 so it has

some personality, that AP is too boring. Ken – who dropped down a level – agrees: “This year I’m in Calc 1 and it was really fun, and people in there were fun, and I was thinking how it would be if I was in AP Calc or whatnot. It just seems a lot more dull in AP. I need some time to relax in school, so, I think it worked out for the better”. Mike sums up a very common opinion:

“Cuz like high school is supposed to be [a social time], like when you have kids you’ll be like, ‘when I was in high school my friends and I, you know, we went to this party, or my friends and I for our senior prank we ...’ and I feel as though if I did AP classes I wouldn’t have time for such like a social life. Where I could have like friends and just do the things I like to do instead of focusing on like what colleges like. I think AP’s just, I don’t want to say a waste, but kind of a waste, you know. Cuz half the kids that are in there are the kids that have like 57 books and the people with three sharpened pencils, the sharpener, and the two calculators for the SAT. They’re those kids. I guess overall, I’m not in to AP, you know, things”. It is clear that being one of “those kids” would not be a socially desirable label, students who at least are rumored to do nothing but school work.

Though I might myself have been one of “those kids” when I was in high school, as a researcher I was often included in the behind-the-scenes eye rolling. One of the funniest moments at school occurred during an English test while I was shadowing Dan, the black honors student. Earlier that day, he had been telling me about how weird the honors kids were and how school was their whole life. With only a few minutes left in the period, an Indian boy rushed to the front of the quiet room chanting “Paper paper paper,” retrieved extra paper, and rushed back to his desk to complete his exam. Dan looked up at me from across the room, shaking his head, to point out this perfect example of his comments.

At the other end of the spectrum are the “bad kids”. It is expected and assumed that the “bad kids” are those in lower tracks – and vice versa. The “bad kids” are the ones Robin

thinks should be in jail, the ones who are ‘not the brightest stars’, the ones who put teachers into bad moods. Teachers confirm these characterizations relatively straightforwardly. For example, one day in a low level science class, the teacher talks to me from across the room while students work. He says, “This class finishes work later” than his other class, that there are “shady characters” here. He’s only partly joking. Another day in early January five students crowd together, anxious about their calculus quiz. They hope the teacher is in a good mood, as apparently that will make the quiz easier somehow. Someone says he looked like it this morning in homeroom, but that he has Math 4 period 3 with all the bad kids so who knows. When we get to calculus class, the teacher is in a good mood. He reports that everyone was here today in Math 4; it’s the first time all year – because it’s too cold to smoke outside. Robin tells me one day that the school could be better: “Just eliminate half the school.” And yet, even though she clearly demonizes the bad kids, she is unwilling to take the next step. When I ask her, “Who would you eliminate?”, she pulls her punches and says, “Actually no, I don’t know”. Robin would prefer a school without the bad kids, but can’t quite bring herself to say it aloud.

So average students must navigate between these two poles – the high and the low, but high and low what constantly changes – in order to successfully place themselves in the school’s hierarchy. Students actively compare themselves to others in this process. One day, while I was observing in a class, a student comments that his older brother took 6 AP classes and is graduating from Rutgers with a double major double minor and a 3.95, while he is only taking one AP class in high school. The teacher jokes, “What happened to YOU?”, and the student responds, “Yeah, it’s hard to live up to”.

This process of comparison allows the student to evaluate whether or not he might be successful at Rutgers.

#### VIGNETTE: HENRY IS LIVING THE PARADOXES

Henry struggles with the implicit no-college-for-some message. In a sense, he is the opposite of Antonio: he internalizes the no-college-for-some message *too much*, and struggles with the reality that he will not attend the college his family hopes he will. Henry, an Asian boy who is desperate to fit in at school, is a low-track student who failed the HSPA the first time, and was exempted from re-taking it. On some level, he knows that he is failing to live up to his own and especially his parents' expectations, and he struggles with that tension. He fibs frequently to cover up his own perceived shortcomings or to heighten his reputation in school; for example, he spread a rumor his senior year that his dad gave several thousand dollars to the school to save a popular extracurricular club that was at risk.

From our first meeting, Henry told me he was really worried about college, and what grades he needed to get in. In an interview in the middle of his junior year, he imagined that in five years he would be graduated from college, getting his master's degree or going to medical school. He dreams of Johns Hopkins, Rutgers, and NYU. In September of his senior year, he tells me he's already applied early decision to Rutgers. He claims to have scored a 1900 on the June SAT, a claim I do not believe. He says his parents want him to go somewhere better than Rutgers but they don't want him to go far



away, and his best friend is advising him not to go to County and then transfer because “he believes in me”.

Yet Henry is taking Math 3, the lowest-track junior math class, because he failed it last year. He’s also retaking sophomore health, sophomore history, and junior history, all of which he failed. He wanted a science class since his college major will be “science”, but it wouldn’t fit. He says, “I told myself I’m gonna pass all these classes because I am never staying back cuz in my whole life I never had to stay back. All through from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup>”. In a college-for-all context, *not going to college* transforms into *being held back*.

Henry knows, but is unwilling to publicize, that his dreams of being a doctor are unlikely. Even as he applies to Rutgers, he tells me his plan is to “Obviously graduate high school, I hope. Get into a, well hopefully transfer into like a college like Rutgers, from Middlesex. Hopefully.” But he is subject to intense pressure from his parents; he tells me his mom “knows I’m smart, but she thinks I just don’t use it. Cuz she’s like, how come all these kids get good grades and look at you, look at your grades. I’m like I’m trying my best. She’s like I know but still, you know, she wants me to have potential.” This prompts one of Henry’s few self-reflective moments: “I just want to be more smarter. I’m smart, I just don’t think I use my brain as much. Yeah, it’s hard.”

Later Henry tells me he’s gotten his early acceptance to Rutgers – apparently untrue – and that his dad’s hard work paid off. He works as a custodian on campus. In January, he tells me that his dad is going to help him get in to the Pharmacy school at Rutgers. Even so, now he says he’d like to be a special ed teacher first. In March, he says he’s taking a four week pharmacy program during Rutgers summer session that will only

cost \$100. Such a program does not exist to my knowledge. In April, he told me he was touring all the dorms. He told me he wants to be a Chinese teacher, and asked me if she needed to do education as well as Chinese at Rutgers. He also is still talking about special ed teaching, and then “after that I’ll go on to my medical degree”. He is still talking like he will go to Rutgers and then medical school, but he is also starting to hedge those aspirations, and starting to think about what happens if “the medical degree doesn’t work”. He says he wants to do something he can finish first. In late May, while I’m sitting in Henry’s math class, he asks his teacher for a County practice placement test. I ask him,

ADE: Are you taking the placement test?

Henry: Yeah

ADE: Why? You were talking about Rutgers

Henry: Well, because Rutgers is a little complicated

Less than a week later, Henry tells me that Rutgers is a place he “might choose”, but that he’s scared of getting distracted there. He spends a lot of our interview rationalizing not getting in, and implying that he’s choosing against it now. The cognitive dissonance he experiences is palpable. He tells me that he feels, “I’m Asian, I’m smart.” He tells me his family tells him that being a pediatrician is too hard for him and that he should teach. He is now set on County, but hopes to only spend one year before transferring. His family hasn’t stopped hoping for Rutgers, though; when I visited him at home in June one of the few things his grandfather said in English was that they wanted him to go to Rutgers. His father is disappointed about County, too.

Henry’s counselor told me that “Henry’s a sweet kid but he’s not very smart”. She thinks that Henry is a “tremendous disappointment to his Asian family of origin; he’s a classified student from a culture where it’s shameful to have children with special needs.”

From the beginning, she tried to tell Henry that Rutgers was not realistic, but Henry applied and was rejected anyway. He deluded himself and others about it. Henry exaggerates about other things to improve his self-image, so it is no surprise that he is lying – to himself or to others – about getting accepted to Rutgers. (Indeed, two years out of high school he implies that he goes to Princeton by telling people he “studies at Princeton”).

What is striking is that through Henry, we can see how the college-for-all paradox is lived and experienced and disseminated. Henry hears the more subtle messages along the way that college is actually not for him, but he is subject to tremendous family and social pressure and is unable to face reality. Henry ignores the subtle messages or puts up a front that they don’t apply to him, until finally he is faced with a college rejection and a more forceful discussion with his counselor about his realistic possibilities. As his counselor says, “Look, the kids all know County, I don’t have to suggest that ... the thing that’s changed since I’ve been here is how many students are going to County first.” We can see Henry struggling against parental and social expectations to go to Rutgers, in conflict with his weak academic performance even in the lowest track.

*Low-Track Students Aren’t Stigmatized, but They Are*

Arguably, no one wants to be stigmatized. Henry fights against stigma he feels as an Asian – supposedly the model minority – failing low-track classes. On the surface, at NJHS, low-track students are not stigmatized. Yet stigma is often engaged “jokingly”

among friends who would never ridicule other students in a different social setting. The jokes often reveal underlying opinions that are more widely shared, and expose how students think of themselves vis-à-vis others, and how they place themselves in the hierarchy of the school. For example, Jason is a heavy set, white, lower track football player in one of the popular crowds. His friends were almost exclusively in higher tracks. He was regularly the butt of jokes, which he tells me doesn't really mind because he grew up with these kids. Nevertheless, the jokes seem piercing to me. One day at lunch, the group ordered Jason to go buy some cookies to share. He returned with the cookies and the change on a paper plate. A girl said to him, "Are you fucking retarded for putting the coins with the cookies?" She was upset about cross-contamination from the coins. Mike, who I was shadowing, chimed in: "We should invest in a shock collar for you." Then Mike started a game. He said, "At least you didn't ..." and then filled in something Jason actually did that the group thought was stupid, such as, "Get a tattoo on your ass". The whole table joined in with new examples, until the bell rang at which point Jason – like every day at lunch – was ordered to gather and dispose of the group's trash. Jason is an easy target because he takes the ridicule, allowing the group to play out their hierarchies in a "safe" environment. Voicing the same stigma about lower track students who weren't their friends would cut too close to the bone and threaten the self-image of the group.

Instead, the dominant discourse in the school is to discuss track differences matter-of-factly and seemingly without judgment. Teachers model this discourse continuously, making no bones about the fact that some material is too difficult for lower track classes. For example, a teacher referred to material on the board for another class: "that's a little beyond your means" – which was met with relief by the inquiring student.

Another teacher, talking with a lower track math class about comparing actual scores to the expected mean, used the SAT as an example. She asked them, if she asked just 2 students their scores, would it be close to the average? No. How about this whole class? How about all her classes? How about if she went to an honors class, or a level 1 or a level 2 class? It is taken for granted that the average SAT scores in each of these classes would be different.

Value judgments often seep through, though. Often when teachers talk to higher track classes about tracking, they're making some kind of encouragement/shaming appeal, such as the English teacher in a Level 1 class who told students, "The quiz is as easy as it gets. My level 2 students can get 100 on it". Another English teacher, passing out plot summaries of the book they were reading, whispered audibly to me, "This is a level 2 class so they need a little more guidance".

Sometimes these comparisons are meant to be compliments, but they don't always work. One day in March, another English teacher in a Level 2 class said to me in the middle of a class, "This is a jackpot assignment! I'm going to remember this!" and then turning to the class, "When did this class turn into an honors class? I love it when it turns into an honors class!" A student grumbles, "Since September". I interpreted his comment as challenging the teacher's hierarchizing compliment. The teacher, in trying to erase the stigma associated with low-track classes, inadvertently highlights and exacerbates that stigma, and it's not lost on her students.

*The special case of the HSPA.* The HSPA provides a rare moment at which all the students across tracks can directly compare themselves to each other. They are forced to

confront the fact that students in Honors and remedial courses are taking the same test.

Most students at NJHS pass<sup>29</sup>, and most treat it as a small hurdle, a distraction from their academic work, like Joseph:

ADE: how did the HSPA go?

Joseph: I don't know I don't really give much thought to the HSPA. HSPA is always easy to me. I'm like this is a test deciding whether you can pass high school. Well I'm pretty confident that I have what it takes to pass high school, so I'm not really that worried about this test.

ADE: Yeah and did you pass it?

Joseph: Yeah of course [laughs]

The HSPA thus is a moment at which students explicitly discuss whether they “have what it takes to pass high school”, and it becomes clear that there are some who do not.

In high track classes, teachers spend little time discussing or preparing for the test, and coach students to expect to pass easily. For example, Ken tells me: “HSPA, it actually went pretty well. Like I don't think HSPA is a problem for me. Like the other kids, like the Level 2 kids that we get the same test, so it's kind of like, from what I heard from I forgot which of my teachers, [the tests] were made I think for Level 1 and Level 2 kids. So that the honors and AP students wouldn't really have a problem and that's pretty much what happened”. In Level 1 and up, students begin studying for the HSPA about the time that lower track classes are winding down from studying into review and a break before the test.

Because it is assumed that “regular” kids will pass the HSPA without problem, it becomes a point of ridicule when one does not pass. Mike told me that actually two of his friends didn't pass:

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<sup>29</sup> See Table 4, Appendix A.

Mike: I thought that was actually pretty funny- I always make fun of them for that  
 ADE: How do they like that?  
 Mike: They kinda get ma. And my friend, every time I bring it up he's just like shut up, I didn't even fail by that much. I'm like, but you still failed. Like you know a 54 is close to you know 55 but you still still failed. So I don't know, I always rip on them.  
 Failing the HSPA is not funny for everyone, though. Even though on the surface there is little stigma for being in lower track classes, the stigma does show up on around the edges, for example when Melina rebuffed my inquiry about her friends who failed the HSPA:

ADE: You said you know a lot of people -  
 Melina: - I know a couple -  
 ADE: who are doing [the remedial class].  
 Melina: I think it's two or something, I don't know. I don't really ask anybody, cuz I think that's, I don't know, I wouldn't be happy telling anybody that I have to be taking [remedial] classes. So I wouldn't want anybody asking me.  
 None of the students I shadowed told me they were embarrassed to have failed the HSPA or to be taking the remedial class, but it's clear that there is some underlying stigma about being in the classes. And indeed, as students began passing the retakes or the alternate assessment and were transferred out of the remedial class, the class numbers dwindled and it became increasingly difficult to sit through. By the end of the year, with only two students left in the English class, it felt like a holding cell more than a classroom.

*County Will Take Them, but Not Really Take Them*

Even as underprepared students are encouraged to pursue college at County, some of the teachers and counselors in the school know that this is an empty promise. As Antonio's counselor explained to me, "Antonio is going to be put into zero level courses,

so County'll take him but not really take him, and so basically we're lying." Many other students at NJHS would take (and pay tuition for) heavily remedial, no-credit classes at County. These students are unlikely to persist in higher education; the six-year completion rates of two-year degrees for students with Cs and Ds in high school is only 13% (Rosenbaum, 2001). Instead, they will flounder at County, fail their classes, and drop out – perhaps suffering psychological trauma along the way. They are also likely to feel the failure as a personal one – they couldn't cut it – or to rationalize it with claims of disinterest – rather than to blame the school for not helping them face reality.

*County Is a Crap School, but It's Not*

The status of the local County College is a frequently raised and avoided issue. In Chapter 3, I discuss the messages the school sends about County being a viable, sometimes even preferable option. Here, I pick up with the messages students take in. The explicit discussion of County as a good option masks the implicit assumption by many students that County is *not* just as good. For example, Mike tells me, "If I don't get accepted I guess I guess to Monmouth or Rutgers or Kean. So I guess if I don't get accepted to that I'll go to County. I'm not saying County is a bad school it's just...". Mike – and other students – feel pressure not to denigrate County, instead couching it as a personal choice not to attend there, even as they make explicit value judgments about it. Similarly, Robin tells me she doesn't "want to end up in County" – language which clearly shows that County would be her last choice. In May, I was sitting in on a class while the teacher



exhorted students to continue working hard. She says, “Seniors remember that college can rescind their acceptances. Do you know what rescind means? And that would be awful. Because at that time you don’t have time to apply somewhere else.” A student calls out, “County!” and the teacher replies, “Yeah I guess they can’t not take you. Actually you can get a pretty excellent education there” and she tells them there are good teachers using the same textbooks as at other schools. Again, we see a complicated balancing of trying not to put County down too much – because that would put down the significant number of students going to County – while simultaneously trying to talk about how other schools are better.

Often the value judgments against County are expressed not in terms of its selectivity or prestige – which would too explicitly rank students – but in terms of its familiarity and popularity among NJHS students. About a third of the class goes to County after graduation, and so students frequently talk about it being like “13<sup>th</sup> grade” or like a continuation of high school. They – accurately – point out that they will know a lot of people there, and many of them live closer to County than to the high school, so they are familiar with its campus as well. One student joked that it shouldn’t even be called County, it should be called “University of [Neighborhood]”. The distinction is cemented when, in the senior assembly, a student asked about excused absences for college visits. The principal and the head of guidance agree that students get three maximum without a conversation first, that they need to bring something back on college letterhead confirming the visit, and that they won’t excuse it “if it’s something like three county colleges and then Harvard”. The message is clear: sure, county college is college and you can take a day off school to visit – but it’s not like Harvard.

*The Paradox Results in Individualized Blame*

This balancing act calls into question the college-for-all mantra and undermines the ability of the school to provide and students to seek appropriate post-secondary counseling. Explicitly, the message is that everyone should go to college, and that even students who are not particularly smart or good at school can go to County, which is a viable and sometimes preferable option. Thus all post-secondary planning is funneled toward “college”. Implicitly, some students hear the message the County might be the best they can hope for, but that County is not as good an option<sup>30</sup> - which translates that they also are not as good. But the advice they get (from teachers and counselors) does not address this or actively seek out other options for them.

Indeed, the whole purpose of counseling comes to seem to be about college, so that students who are not planning towards college remove themselves from the process. Take Ali, for example. He is a black, low-track student with a highly disrupted family life who dreamed of being a doctor. He thought that becoming a medical technician would be a good step along this path, and did spend a lot of time talking to his counselor about his options. But as his family life spiraled out of control, he began to withdraw and dropped his post-secondary planning. In May, he told me,

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<sup>30</sup> This also devalues the kinds of post-secondary education or training that are unique to County and often competitive, like culinary school or other labor market certifications.

I'm sure [my counselor] have more important things to do because he have students that actually wanna go to college and you know, I mean I haven't really initiated really talking to him about that. Well at- there was a time I you know, I was talking to him about that, I just never actually went through with it anymore.

Ali hears the implicit message of his lower worth quite clearly, and comes to believe that he does not have a legitimate claim on his counselor's attention. I want to make it clear that Ali's counselor *wanted* to help him, and was willing to strategize with him about paying for medical tech school, for example. The implicit messages fostered by the structure of the school are not about bad counselors or bad teachers intentionally undermining the post-secondary goals of their students; rather these are messages propagated by the institutional structure which even good counselors have trouble combating. But Ali comes to believe that his failure to make post-secondary plans is a *personal* failure, one rooted in his lack of follow-through.

#### VIGNETTE: HOW LEA MATCHES HERSELF WITH A COLLEGE

Amidst these paradoxes interlacing students' daily lives, they must somehow evaluate their place in the hierarchy of the high school and extrapolate how that might play out in terms of their post-secondary choices and chances. This sorting process is easier to see via a story. Lea is a cheerful, talkative student who is half spanish and half asian. During class one day in the spring of her junior year, Lea was talking with her teacher about college. Lea said, "I have no idea what I want to do." The teacher told her,

“That’s ok, where do you want to go?” and suggested that visiting is a good start. Then the teacher asked her, “Lea are you smart? What’s your GPA?” She replied, “I dunno, I just get As and Bs and I got this [National Honor Society invitation]”.

Lea takes all Level 1 classes, and has a 3.8 GPA at the beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, which puts her just above the midpoint in class rankings. She does not take challenging classes at school, but chooses things she is interested in, like the Media and Communications Academy, and has early release so she can work at her long-term job. She’s also involved in a lot of school activities. When I ask if she ever considered taking AP classes, she tells me, “No I’m really lazy. I barely make it through my regular classes so I’m not gonna be the overachiever, I’m gonna try to do good in what I’m doing”. In the spring of her senior year, she reflected with me on how she chose her college, a SUNY college: “I felt like this was a school that I am capable of getting in to, number one, and number two it’s not like, I knew that I wasn’t gonna go to anything like an Ivy League school, I was just definitely not, I wasn’t even gonna shoot for that”. What she knew for sure, as early as her junior year, was that her dad would not let her go to County, even though she thought it was the most cost-effective option.

Lea: My dad’s [...] not allowing me to go to County College even. I’m telling him it’s not that bad cuz I think I have already 11 credits that I can get from the classes I’m taking now [...]

ADE: How come your dad doesn’t want you to go there?

Lea: He looks at it as like a crap school, not like a crap - he just, with my dad, like with my family, like no one’s really gone to college. So like especially me, like being his daughter, he feels like I should be the boss kind of thing, like he doesn’t want me to do County.

Selecting a college is no easy task. But it becomes incalculably more difficult when one has to think not only about the college, but about one’s own biography and how that

might match or not match with potential colleges. How does a student like Lea make sense of the various conflicting pieces of feedback she gets about where she fits in at her school and where she will fit in the college hierarchy? How does she compile that feedback to make decisions about where to apply? Consider some of the data that Lea has to work with:

- Her teacher asks her whether she is smart: but shouldn't the teacher be an appropriate evaluator of that?
- Her teacher aligns "smart" with "GPA"
- Her 3.8 GPA seems pretty good but places her just above the midpoint of her class
- She was invited to apply for National Honor Society
- She takes Level 1 – not AP or Honors – classes and considers herself lazy but good at school
- Her father considers County College beneath her, but he himself took classes there and a lot of her peers will go there

Lea must gather and sort through these potentially conflicting bits of information. By the time she graduates, she can reflect retrospectively about how SUNY was a good middle ground college – not County, not an Ivy – that matched her own middle ground preparation and drive. In order to come to this conclusion, Lea has to evaluate herself: being in National Honor Society doesn't mean she is Ivy-league material; having a good GPA doesn't tell her whether she is smart; she knows she is good at science but she chooses not to take challenging classes; her peers will go to County but her father wants something "better" for her. This process of sorting out one's place is a large part of deciding what is a reasonable post-secondary goal.

*Students Do a College Search, But They Don't*

Combine Lea's ambiguous analysis of her personal attributes with a vague and poorly-defined set of criteria for colleges, and it's actually surprising how often students are happy with their college choices. There are thousands of other middle ground colleges that Lea does not really consider. Most students do not perform what we might think of as the quintessential college search, laying out all the variables and selecting colleges that match their desires and wishes on a number of key attributes. In fact, it is primarily the advantaged students, with college-educated parents, who do this kind of search (Holland, 2012; McDonough, 1997). Even then, such students rely on a somewhat scattershot process that is highly dependent on the knowledge of their friends and what they happen to hear about which schools. Indeed, students are generally not looking at the universe of all available colleges, but rather a very small pre-selected sample that tends to skew more toward colleges in close geographical proximity<sup>31</sup>. More than 80% of NJHS students who attend post-secondary education go in-state; another 10% go to New York or Pennsylvania. Ken, nearly in the top decile at NJHS and pursuing a degree in computer engineering, applied to the very first two colleges he ever heard of: Rutgers and NYU.

The average high school student knows little about college or the college status hierarchy, so they rely on peers, parents, teachers, and counselors for ideas about where

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<sup>31</sup> See Appendix D for a table of New Jersey colleges, with ranking and selectivity information.

to apply. Apart from the explicit message that everyone should go, most discussion from the counselor side is dominated by the idea of “fit” (see Chapter 2). Fit stands in for a number of different characteristics, though, from academic selectivity to cost to campus location to campus culture. Fit collapses all these multiple dimensions of difference into one single continuum. Students at NJHS rarely differentiated among these various criteria. This muddles the post-secondary decision process, because important differentiations among colleges are lost. It makes it difficult to talk about the relative merits or selectivity of different colleges, as well. Instead, college choices emerge for students as vague feelings of “comfort”, even when students are choosing from a very wide range of potential colleges. For example, this is a typical description from a student of how she chose her college:

ADE: How did you pick Wagner?

Rachel: Actually I didn't even want to go to Wagner. My best friend wanted to go. And she dragged me there.[...] She said just come with me, come with me. So I said all right. My first thought was I wanted a big school. And Wagner's very small. So I went with her one day. I had nothing else to do. I went with her parents. And I wound up falling in love with it. And she did too. She's actually going to wind up just going to Rutgers. And then I went back with my parents cuz I really really liked it. And that was it, like I just knew that's where I wanted to be. So it's kind of weird you know that I fell upon Wagner. Cuz I totally at first I was like there's no way I'm going to Wagner. It's way too small. It's thirty minutes from home. And then I went there and I fell in love with the campus. And just kind of knew.

Thus Rachel compares Wagner – a small, selective, suburban private liberal arts college – with Rutgers, a large public comprehensive state university. It's unclear which variables are most important to her: size, location, distance from home, selectivity? Rachel did not, after “falling in love” with Wagner, seek out other schools that were comparable on multiple dimensions and then make a decision about which of those “fit” best.

It was suggested to me that students choose their colleges as if they are throwing a dart blindfolded, and that their class status determines which dartboard they are turned to (Wright, 2012). This does seem to make some sense; wealthy students are more likely to be academically prepared and financially capable of affording elite colleges, so they may be selecting from a list with a broad geographical range but a narrow range on other criteria like size or selectivity. Likewise, poorer students are likely to rule out elite colleges and focus just on colleges with affordable sticker prices. From this view, my own college application list makes sense. I applied to Colorado College, Fort Lewis College, Rice University, Seattle University, Trinity University (San Antonio), and UC-Santa Cruz – a list that in retrospect a guidance counselor ought to have been pleased with. My criteria were clearly narrow and consistent; I had one or two “safety” schools (Fort Lewis and UC-SC) that I still would have been happy to attend; and I disregarded sticker price, waiting instead to look at financial aid offered.

But at NJHS, this is not the way students tended to imagine the universe of possible colleges. At least, it was not the way students below the top decile did it. Indeed, imagining dartboards like that presupposes a tremendous amount of college knowledge that students, on average, do not have. Instead, as I’ve indicated, most students limited their search to colleges very close to their homes. When Rachel, above, said that Wagner was half an hour from her house, she was noting its *distance* rather than its proximity. Despite the widespread availability of college search engines, free online through multiple venues, students tend not to perform the idealized college search. Not only do students tend to rely on hearsay to compile their application lists, they do not carefully delineate criteria, and they are often mistaken. For example, it became clear to me during



an interview with a parent that to her, “university” meant a school that offered four-year degrees and “college” was a school that offered two-year degrees. In the local context, this makes sense, because County is a college and Rutgers is a University. But broaden the scope beyond that, and the distinction makes little sense. In a hypothetical example, the typical average student at NJHS might have Rutgers, County, Kean, Rider, and NYU on their dartboard, with little cognizance of the major differences among the schools on multiple axes. Given this, it makes sense why so many students go to County: perhaps they don’t get in to NYU and Rutgers; Kean is in a location many parents fear; and Rider has a high sticker price. If the student had, instead, focused their search on schools similar to Kean in a broader geographic range, they might well have been able to attend a four-year college.

### *Pinning Things Down*

Despite the awkwardness of talking about the relative selectivity of colleges, students must at some point make decisions about which colleges they will apply to. This involves figuring out where they think they might fit via judging where they fit in the hierarchy at their school, judging the relative selectivity of colleges, and making assessments about how those map together.

There are explicit messages at the school that “college is college” and that County counts – teachers often even encourage it as a way to get cheap credits. But, as I describe above, there’s also a sense that the persistence in calling County just as good is actually

everyone trying to convince themselves that this is true. Around the edges of discourse, there are clear indications that County has low relative worth.

One day when I was shadowing Jorge during his senior year, he was deep in conversation with his girlfriend Robin about getting County credits for their high school classes. Students with a C or better in Level 1 or above can pay \$100 per class to County for three credits, which are then transferrable to other colleges. Many students at NJHS take advantage of this program. Jorge complained about this being low standards. Robin replied that this program is “for all students”, implying that though it might seem like low standards to them, it would not seem that way to others. Jorge went on to muse how weird it is that “everything is optional” for the William Paterson University application. He remarked that he would be in the top 10 percentile there, and that his classmate who got a 2400 on the SAT would be in the top 1 percentile. Robin corrected him: “not even 1, .0001!”

During this conversation, Jorge and Robin engaged in the process of figuring out where they fit vis-à-vis their classmates and vis-à-vis future colleges. They assessed that they are over-qualified for County, and probably overqualified for William Paterson, too. But they are clearly in a different league from the friend with the perfect SAT scores. This process helps them figure out where they ought to be applying (in the end, both attended Ithaca College).

*Vignette: Dan Challenges the Hard Work Paradox*

Intrinsic to the choices facing teens is the most basic of all American myths: hard work gets rewarded. Students at NJHS – like all of us – want to believe this myth, and most of them do work hard in an effort to get ahead. Dan began as no exception. A smart, athletic black honors student born to upwardly mobile, educated immigrant parents, Dan is in mostly honors and AP courses and – until his senior year – excelled in them. Pretty much everyone – including Dan himself – agrees that he is at the top of his class academically. His counselor, for example, assumed that he would attend NJIT Honors College or Stevens Institute with a scholarship, and that “he would be with people as smart as he is”. During his junior year, Dan told me, “Even though I’m probably in the top 5 percentile in terms of like grade point average, I feel like because I get away with not doing my work, like a lot of other kids who were in the like the same category get like the same grades were like, ‘You don’t even work hard, you just tend to pay attention to the right things.’ But they could do it too, it was their choice to work hard and they get better grades for it. [...] I feel like I slacked off a bit. I wouldn’t even say a bit, a lot. I know I’m getting away with murder.” Nevertheless, he feels like his life plan is solid: “I’ve kinda set myself up in terms of being black and having a higher than like a 2.5 GPA [...] I really I think I’ll be somewhat successful. I don’t think I’ll be filthy rich, I think I’ll live comfortable.”

Dan’s straightforward attitude about his intelligence and lack of hard work frustrates his classmates and his teachers, and belies the myth that hard work gets rewarded. The fact that he can get good grades effortlessly – and that he continually points this out – undermines the mythology at the school that elides hard work and smarts. Thus, his vocal presence challenges (if only as a token) the status quo. His

teachers repeatedly tell me that he's "not your average honors student" and plead with him to do some homework. He is dismissive of the "booksmart" kids in his classes, and straightforward about getting good grades without studying; he says he has a photographic memory for science. One day in his Honors Physics class, Dan is lamenting how terrible it is to be so smart and have insight that others don't have. He says, "No smart person has a regular life. It sucks to be smart." Unwilling to allow Dan to define the terms in this way, a classmate challenges him: "What do you know about that? I have a social life outside this. I just have a little bit higher work ethic." Dan replies, "I don't work, I just take the tests and I get the same grades". Of course this reiterates the basic problem which people in the school have a hard time deconstructing: Dan challenges the widespread notion that "being smart" means "working hard".

By Dan's senior year, his somewhat ambivalent perspective has evolved into disdain for the "bullshit system". He is upset that the school "forced" him to take AP English, where he feels like a drone. He tells me that "there's not many kids of my caliber of intelligence who see things as open-mindedly as I do". He pities his peers who seem to buy in to the system, who spend their whole lives studying, who are only "booksmart". Dan struggles to define himself against the mainstream, particularly against other honors students, and he feels alone and misunderstood. He tells me that most of his friends are "too dumb to understand" and think he is "just trying to be rebellious". Gradually his disdain becomes disengagement from school, and he brags that he missed the most school days of any senior (somewhere around 50). He refuses the increasingly frantic guidance offered by his counselor and teachers. In late April, nearing graduation, he tells me, "I don't have to work hard because I'm not stupid, but that leaves me open to

becoming a lazy bastard, which I've become". This attitude is difficult for his classmates to hear, because it implies that their hard work is required because they're not smart enough. And yet most of them are doing well in honors courses and planning on selective four-year colleges, and they certainly feel smart. Ultimately this translates into intense dislike (or jealousy) of Dan rather than a call to arms to challenge the system.

At least in the short run, Dan's resistance against the school does not serve him well. He barely graduates, after the principal approves a waiver for his attendance, and his grades slipped dramatically. Because he refused to play along with the college planning process – he started one application to NJIT but never finished it – Dan's vision in late May is to take "baby steps" and start at County. He thinks he'll be the first doctor to start at a community college, transfer to a state school, and then get his MD from an Ivy. Though he saw enough of the "bullshit system" to resist it, he is still subject to its traps; he tells me that college is "gonna be harder, cuz I got lazy but, I'm smart enough to do it, I'm convinced". And if he bombs at college, he says, he can always do something illegal to make money. Dan's token resistance against the paradox – calling people out and effectively removing himself from the educational treadmill – is not even a Pyrrhic victory, because he doesn't benefit from it at all. Indeed, all it accomplishes is to torpedo his chances at finishing a 4-year degree (much less medical school). Is he protecting himself from the possible future embarrassment of failure, by dropping out on his own terms?

The school fails him because there is no one who is able to engage with him on a level he appreciates, to talk to him about his critique of the system and where he fits in. Perhaps he wouldn't have been open to such discussion anyway, but the approach taken by his

teachers and counselors – exhorting him to work harder and reapply himself – did not work because it failed to take his critique seriously. That approach framed him as lazy, when he wanted to frame himself as a principled critic. At the same, Dan knows he’s gotten lazy, and perhaps his is just normal teenage rebellion. In one of Dan’s more self-reflective moments, he told me, “I didn’t want to just like do what [my parents] wanted. Cuz I feel like in the end of the day I’m gonna get somewhere where they want me to go”.

The question is how much can a person like Dan mess up and still remain on the middle-class path? Perhaps his parents’ solidly middle-class status and his intelligence will carry him through, and in retrospect we will consider that he took a grungy gap year. But Dan’s status is more fragile due to his race, and his risk of arrest and incarceration is much higher<sup>32</sup>. The question is important because it ties in to the reproduction literature, which tells us how closely a child’s economic and educational path will follow their parents’.

### *The Reproduction Paradox of Our Time*

Willis, in the 1970s, asked the important question of how working class kids get working class jobs. In a very different context, Willis set out to show that British working

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the year after high school Dan was arrested when friends he was with stole candy from Wal-Mart while doing drugs. His father paid for a good lawyer and the charges were dropped, as the security cameras showed Dan mocking his friends rather than joining in.

class kids were not simply blindly coerced by a capitalist system that needed workers more than it needed thinkers, but rather that those kids, through disengagement with school, actually ended up *choosing* the jobs the system needed them to have anyway. Most cultural sociologists now take for granted the fact “that there are deep disjunctions and desperate tensions within social and cultural reproduction” (Willis, 1981 [1977]). In the 1980s, MacLeod showed us another stage of the reproduction process, in which low-income American white teens rejected the achievement ideology that told them if they failed in school it was because they weren’t smart enough or working hard enough. The paradox facing today’s average American teens is different. They are all explicitly expected and encouraged to go to college. Vocational schools have closed across the country, and even vocational programs within high schools are at risk, in the face of educational philosophies that encourage college for all often without considering student choices or preferences or the long-term impact on students and the economy of shifting resources away from technical skills. The successful auto mechanics program at NJHS, for example, has to fight every year to remain open. Their president – a black man, a symbol of the openness of American society – tells them that they should all go to college. And yet many of them don’t want to, for reasons that echo either Willis’s lads or MacLeod’s Hallway Hangers or Brothers. They are interested in technical skills, and no one really will quite come out and say whether a technical certification counts as college. Or they believe they’re not good enough, because they’ve been tracked into low-achievement classes their whole lives. Or they try everything they can think of, follow the advice of their teachers and counselors, and end up throwing money and years at a two-year college from which they will never graduate or transfer out.

What these teens do not have is adult guidance that helps them understand what their possible futures might look like. No one sits Dan down and tells him – even if he would listen – that he is not likely to be able to move from County to an Ivy League medical school, and that he should get his act together and go to the best four-year college he can get in to. No one tells Antonio that a computer tech major is going to require math skills he simply doesn't have or enjoy. Instead, they let him fail four of five courses at County that fall, and let him decide on his own to drop out – in debt (Clark, 1960; Rosenbaum, 2001). No one tells Henry's parents that he isn't going to be going to Rutgers, no matter how much they nag and shame him. Instead, he continues to delude himself and lie to others to project a front consistent with their expectations. No one tells Ali that becoming a medical technician – which might be an excellent job for him, if someone would help him figure out how to get there – is not going to lead to becoming a doctor. Instead, they let him believe that he actually wasn't worthy of talking to a counselor because he wasn't likely to go to college.

Of course we don't really want counselors telling teens that their futures are closed, acting as gatekeepers to higher education which is the only reliable way to be upwardly mobile in our society. So these teens are doubly damned: they are not on the higher track where they are likely to succeed at college, *and* they are not getting appropriate advising for the lower track. College-for-all creates an environment where the school *cannot* properly advise a large proportion of its students, and thus those students become trapped by the college-for-all frame. This also prevents them from making realistic plans or even knowing the odds against them if they choose to make unrealistic plans.



Students get a pseudo-agentic message that the harder they work the better they will do in school and the more successful they will be in the rest of their lives.

Responsibility for success is thereby individualized, so when things don't come through – as for Ali – the failure is interpreted as personal failure, rather than structural failure on the part of the school or society, or even a particular person in the school letting them down. The institutionalized hierarchy of tracking remains unquestioned and taken-for-granted. This scenario implies to students that the path they are on is not totally set, that they have a significant degree of control over its outcome, and that the outcome is ultimately their responsibility.

We tell students that we aren't keeping score, that they can all 'win' and go to college. But this simply isn't true, and high school is the time when many of them realize it. This shifts the emotional and psychic burden away from us – the adults who are meant to guide them – onto teens, as they struggle to find their place in the world and protect themselves from the damage of educational failure. Thus they spend a lot of time and energy in high school navigating this hierarchy, figuring out how they fit vis-à-vis their peers and when they can talk about that openly. Our insistence on promoting a classless society where everyone wins causes damage to the young people who at some point have to figure out that we are misleading them, and then – on their own – must figure out where that leaves them.

## Chapter 5: Muddling through and on

### RETURNING TO KEN AND TOBY

We opened with Ken and Toby, and it seems fitting to return to them in the end. I characterized their pathways out of high school as polar opposites: Ken seemed to have a straight and narrow pathway that ended in college success; Toby seemed to have a difficult, detoured pathway that ended in dropping out and manual labor. Here, I want to explore some of the messages Ken and Toby got from those around them, and how they responded.

Ken never really seemed to struggle with the mixed messages I heard at NJHS. Because he was in mostly AP classes, he in fact heard a straightforward college-for-all message, and he never questioned that he was included in that message. He might have; his family struggled with money, and he knew he would have to live at home – he could well have considered County instead. But Ken received continuous messages that Rutgers was the more appropriate choice for him. First, his older sister, with whom he was close, was successful at Rutgers. This gave him a clear path to follow, a path his parents were happy with; in fact, his parents urged him to work harder at school. Second, in his honors and AP classes, he repeatedly heard messages from his teachers about how he should expect to do well at Rutgers. For example, his teachers gave advice about what courses to take and why not to get early release in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. His teachers also reassured him (along with his classmates) that their curriculum would prepare them to succeed at Rutgers. And they explained that the HSPA is designed for a lower track, so Ken (and his classmates)

should not expect any trouble with it. Even if Ken did have doubts about college, he hears a consistent message that he is destined and prepared for Rutgers.

Toby, on the other hand, was battered by mixed messages on every side. He never really wanted to go to college, and in fact saw little use in high school. And yet he felt like a failure for dropping out and getting a GED. He struggled against cultural messages that told him he was useless if he did not finish high school, and he felt compelled to stay in because of that. Toby was not supported in his schooling by his parents; his mom encouraged him to drop out in 11<sup>th</sup> grade to join the Coast Guard, and then, apparently inadvertently, undermined his chances of graduating by taking him on a cruise in September of his senior year. Toby had no role models to follow; his parents didn't go to college, nor did he have older friends or siblings who went. And Toby got mixed messages from the school, as well. His counselor advised him against the military, so he heard conflicting things between home and school. His counselor also went to great lengths to keep Toby enrolled, but then suggested night school as an alternative. And Toby thought his teachers thought he was "a piece of shit". He failed so many classes early on in high school that the school expected he would have trouble passing the HSPA, and so two periods his junior year were HSPA prep. He passed without trouble, but the HSPA prep classes meant he had a full schedule and it was extremely difficult for him to get all his classes in. In the end, Toby seems to have ended up where many thought he would in the first place: dropping out, working at the auto body shop. But he was so close to staying in school and graduating, so many times. Numerous interventions on the part of his counselor did not seem to be enough.

Or perhaps they simply weren't what Toby needed; he likely would have been much happier and much more successful with a reduced schedule that allowed him to work more, or a certification program that would have allowed him to start his diesel mechanics training much earlier. Toby hated school, but he did not hate learning. And he struggled with feeling he was letting himself down, and being judged by others, for leaving school. There has to be a more productive way of engaging teens like Toby and helping them achieve their educational and occupational goals without making them feel so bad about themselves.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

### *College-For-All?*

In this dissertation, I have shown how the lives of regular kids are framed by several central paradoxes as they prepare for life after high school. Most broadly, they live in college-for-all era in which they know they are supposed to go to college, both for their future financial success and to simply be a good American citizen. As President Obama put it in his first State of the Union Address:

It is our responsibility as lawmakers and educators to make [the educational] system work. But it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in it. And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country – and this country needs and values the talents of every American. That is

why we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. (Obama, 2009)

As others have pointed out (Carnevale et al., 2010), this goal is lofty and unlikely. Yet it frames students as individually responsible for getting some kind of post-secondary skills or education.

My focus on the “regular” kids is an empirical contribution to a field that tends to focus on the overachievers or the at-risk kids. This is one of the first sociological studies to focus on how the “middle 80%” navigate their way out of high school. As such, it offers a great deal to policy-makers and educators who need to know how to engage and best serve the majority of their students. They are clearly not the homogeneous comparison group they are often assumed to be, and interventions might be most effective for them. Yet perhaps even more importantly, this empirical contribution allows me to make a novel analytical contribution to the college-for-all debate.

As I explore in Chapter 1, it is not clear at all that President Obama is actually advocating “college” for all; he includes vocational training and apprenticeship right along with traditional four-year college. And Rosenbaum himself advocates these sorts of post-secondary training programs, in which students can get short-term, high-reward certifications that allow them employment or future educational opportunities (Rosenbaum, 2011). So if Obama is advocating college-for-all, so is Rosenbaum. In other words, it quickly becomes clear that the catch-all term “college” is totally insufficient for the kinds of nuanced conversations we need to have about how to mentor and advise our young people.

Indeed, our young people themselves have less knowledge than we assume about the domain of higher education. During an interview with a Hispanic parent, it became clear to me that she understood “college” to mean a two-year school, and “university” to mean a four-year school. Another time, I overheard two white teachers explaining to a black boy in their Level 2 11<sup>th</sup> grade English class that there was a difference between college and law school. Indeed, generalizing from how students explained their parents’ educational backgrounds to me, it became clear that “college” has come to mean “any formal education after high school”.

And yet the diversification of higher education is meaningful, and not every option is commensurable. I have already discussed the negative impact on chances of BA completion for students who start out at two-year colleges; indeed, only students who attend elite, private four-year colleges have stable, high completion rates (Hout, 2008). Increasingly, degrees from elite colleges mean more than degrees from non-elite colleges (Lucas, 2001), and those degrees are increasingly reserved for the already-elite students (Khan, 2011). Higher education is an increasingly stratified system which increasingly excludes working-class and even middle-class students from getting on the ladder, much less climbing it. Yet even non-elite private four-year colleges can be obscenely expensive, and encouraging students to go there means encouraging them to take on mortgage-like debt they will have difficulty repaying (Martin and Lehren, 2012). It is no longer enough to simply encourage and counsel high school students to go to college; we have to talk to them about which colleges, at what costs, and with what payoff.

*Reproduction in the College-For-All Era*

Three more specific paradoxes organize college planning in the high school. First, counselors with a pedagogical role conception use scaffolding to help students through the post-secondary planning process. The more these counselors do for or with their students, the less they acknowledge or feel that work. Scaffolding tends to erase the work of the teacher. This may be true as well from the student's perspective, because scaffolding allows the appearance of dependent independence: students who are well-scaffolded by supportive counselors might *also* feel that they are "doing it on their own" with little help.

Secondly, NJHS sends students the message that "everyone should go to college, but college is not for everyone". Institutional structures promote mixed messages which allow an explicit college-for-all message to turn into an implicit no-college-for-some message. Most students hear the appropriate message, but certain others are unable to, with unfortunate consequences for their post-secondary plans. In turn, students hear the message that "we don't keep score, but they do". The process of being in high school is a process of figuring out where you stand, not only vis-à-vis your peers but also as a contributing adult in society. I would argue that regular kids have to do this "figuring out" much earlier in high school than the overachievers, for whom college is a given.

The implication of all this is that reproduction is not happening the way it used to. College-for-all means students are not being pushed down and encouraged to take working-class jobs or to settle for a high school diploma. Rather, students are being encouraged *all* to go to college, no matter how unprepared they might be. Indeed,

teachers and counselors even try to address the underlying inequalities facing their students, and wish to give more support to students who need more help. So students who do not make it under these conditions feel that they have *failed* down, that they were given the chance to succeed and they could not make it work. As with MacLeod's Brothers, regular students believe in the achievement ideology that tells them they can make it, and feel responsible – as if they merely did not try hard enough or were not smart enough – when they don't.

Finally, my research highlights how gatekeeping is not an event that occurs at one point in time, but rather is a process over time as students begin to figure out where they stand. Students are rarely – never, if we are to believe their counselors – told not to apply to a reach school. They are only encouraged to go, sometimes with some careful advice about including safety schools on their list. And yet students often reported to me that their counselors did tell them not to apply. Counselors may be avoiding explicit gatekeeping messages, but most students are eventually hearing them loud and clear. As students compare their records against their classmates, and look at the requirements of colleges, they begin to sort out reasonable futures. But they do this with little understanding of the implications of their choices, and without guidance that can help them understand all their options, they can make choices they might regret. Importantly, they tend to make choices conditioned by the financial and knowledge resources their parents have to share with them, which in turn reproduces class across generations.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



The challenge of doing policy-relevant work is the burden of then making policy recommendations, a burden which causes me to feel the Imposter Syndrome quite acutely. Nevertheless, there are some basic recommendations stemming from this work that make sense to me. The goal of all of these recommendations is to help counselors and schools be more explicit about their goals for every student, and help every student be more successful in accomplishing them. First and foremost, we – on the national as well as local levels – must come to grips with what, exactly, we mean by “college” when we encourage everyone to go. There is incredible vagueness stemming all the way from President Obama’s recommendation down to how individual students understand various post-secondary options. I am generally convinced by Rosenbaum’s arguments that we do a majority of our students a disservice when we lead them to believe that the only route to success is to achieve a Bachelor’s degree at a four-year college. This is the route to success for many of them, and we should continue doing everything we can to get students accepted and persisting at such colleges. But this singular message has allowed students to believe they are making good choices when they attend a two-year, open-access college with the intent to transfer. Policy-makers, I think, have been sufficiently disillusioned from this belief, but teachers, counselors, parents and students have yet to hear the message. We’ve got to stop lying to teenagers about their chances of success on this pathway, because it is the teens who get hurt when we are not courageous enough to have forthright conversations with them.

In addition, we must talk more about post-secondary training and certification programs that are *not* the traditional Bachelor’s degree. It seems to me that a great number of our students (including many in the top or “remembered” half) might well

prefer and excel in such programs. It might be quite fruitful to remind particularly our strongest students that they do not have to go *straight* to four-year college, either. A productive gap-year might result in significantly more mature students entering college, and perhaps could reduce attrition. I make this last comment advisedly, because the success of the recommendation likely depends on the demographics of the student; weaker students who do not go straight to college might well be less likely to ever get there.

Fulfilling these recommendations will be tricky, because in addition we also should avoid falling back into a tracked system that allows less mobility. As Goldrick-Rab(2011) put it, we academics and politicians shouldn't assume it's just "other peoples' children" who oughtn't go to four-year colleges. (Mobility doesn't always mean up, after all!). Systems that move the decision earlier in the students' lives – as is widely cited regarding Germany – exacerbate the reproduction of inequality. I don't believe that kids should be forced to make academic/vocational track choices before high school. But to make that work, researchers must talk clearly with counselors and families about the likelihood of success along various pathways. Counselors are right not to discourage high hopes, but those high hopes ought to be tempered with some guidance about just how difficult or unlikely the desired outcome is. Counselors should tell weak students that they can aim for transferring out of a two-year school to get their BA, but that only 10% of students like them succeed at that. Some students will rise to the challenge, and – crucially – they will know ahead of time that it will be a challenge, and they will be better prepared to seek out support that will increase their chances of completion. Other

students will reevaluate their aspirations, and counselors who have good information on other pathways can support them in that process.

My recommendations for counselors are relatively straightforward. First, counselors need education about the college application process, preferably as a course of study rather than on-the-job training. This education should include what we know about completion rates for various demographics in various types of post-secondary schooling or training. Counselors should know which certifications are most in-demand in the local labor market and most able to provide sufficient incomes.

Second, counselors need post-secondary feedback on their own students. Counseling offices should keep better records of where students applied and the outcomes of those applications; these are greatly facilitated by proprietary software like Naviance, and while I'd rather this was freeware, I'd settle for it being budgeted for every school. Counselors also need feedback on what happened after the students leave the high school: did the student show up at college? Change to a different college? Start at a four-year and reverse transfer to a two-year? Drop or flunk out of a two-year? Transfer for a BA? Basic data like these are difficult for schools to obtain on their own, due to response rates, but states could get involved (like Florida has) to more effectively track students after they graduate. Such data are crucial for effective counseling.

Third and most difficult, the counseling timelines in low-college-sending schools must be changed to more effectively prepare students for post-secondary education. As I describe in Chapter 2, this will involve a radical shift in counselors' role conceptions, to a more pedagogical, scaffolding role, as well as a shift in the counseling calendar. All of this would be easier if we had more counselors who were more strategically deployed

(Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011). Caseloads of about 100 in private schools mean that each student gets individualized attention as they plan their academic trajectories and make their post-secondary plans. Counselors in public schools tell me that there is a big difference even between 160 and 200. And if we could reassign some of counselors' paperwork, they could be much more effective with the large caseloads they already have. Counselors spend way too much time pushing paper and proctoring tests in school. Other staff can easily do these tasks; counselors are uniquely qualified to provide academic and emotional support to teens and they universally say they spend too little time doing this.

Once counselors have acquired the post-secondary data I recommend above, they could disseminate that information to teachers in their school. Teachers, too, need to know that when they recommend that students get cheap credits first at County, the plan is likely to backfire. And teachers need training to know how to approach students who might not want or be likely to succeed on a traditional college pathway, without allowing students to individualize the blame.

Post-secondary institutions play a role, too, and they face a student population that is much changed from what they used to expect. Students are older, more diverse in every imaginable way, and much more likely to transfer in and out. To increase timely completion among all students, schools need to welcome and facilitate the experiences of part-time students. This includes what many institutions are already doing – more night classes, more online classes – and other things where there's still a long way to go – figuring out (with the state and federal governments) how to handle student loans, welfare eligibility, and child care, among other things. Just as important, institutions

collectively have to figure out articulation agreements and how to handle transfer and commensurability of credits. Students who complete Associate's degrees often face tremendous difficulty in transferring those credits toward a Bachelor's degree, and often have to re-take very similar classes while piling up credits that don't count towards a degree.

It would not be novel for me to recommend that parents get involved, and of course the parents most likely to get involved are those who need to the least. Yet if counselors and teachers were better equipped to guide students, they could make up some of the gap. In fact, apart from at private schools, parents of regular kids speak to counselors and teachers at shockingly low rates. Many counselors estimated to me that they had conversations with 10% of their students' parents. Encouraging counselors to meet outside regular work hours – an admittedly difficult proposition – would perhaps enable more parents to meet with them, even once, along the way.

And finally, students themselves must step up, challenge their counselors, teachers and parents to give them better information about their options and be honest about their likelihood of success. This book, ultimately, is about teens' lives and futures, and it is teens who will reap the rewards or pay the price of their decisions. The paradoxes I've described in this book are yours. So, regular kids, here's my challenge: make sure you have all the information you need to make those decisions. Find out the completion rates in the school you want to go to. Find out how long it takes people to finish their degrees. Find out how much debt you'll be in, and how much your monthly repayment will be when you graduate. Find out what kinds of jobs you can get with that degree or certification, and think hard about whether they will be emotionally,

intellectually, and financially fulfilling for you. And then, when you leave high school, make sure you're leaving with a plan you're happy with, that looks like it will lead to a good life, however you define that.

## Chapter 6: Methodological Appendix

### OVERVIEW

This dissertation draws on two separate qualitative data sources. In the first wave, I interviewed high school guidance counselors around the state of New Jersey about their work, their interactions with students, typical practices and beliefs about post-secondary planning. Drawing on findings from those interviews, I selected a high school at which to conduct two years of ethnographic research, sitting in on classes, shadowing students, and following a focal group of 17 students through their junior and senior years. I also interviewed about half of their parents, and about 30 teachers at the school. Piecing these two sets of data together allows me to understand the complexity of the institutional structures in which students make their way out of high school, while focusing on the daily practices within one school that pile up, eventually becoming decisions about their post-secondary actions. Below, I discuss each phase of the research in depth.

### NAVIGATING ETHNOGRAPHY IN A SCHOOL

People never said, but frequently strongly implied, that I was crazy for doing a school ethnography. I heard horror stories about getting permission from the school and getting my research plan past the IRB. Indeed, I think in retrospect my dissertation chair *was* crazy for signing off on a more than two year ethnographic dissertation project. And there were some challenges – mostly different from what I expected – which I will

discuss below. But I was lucky to embark on this project during graduate school, lucky enough to have funding so that I could truly throw myself into the field. For two years, most of my thoughts and activities revolved around NJHS. I don't know any other time in my career when that might be possible again.

I often joke that I can tell what high school was like for people by how they react when I tell them that I went back for two years. Some felt I was lucky; others drew in their breath and asked me how I would deal with all the personal shit that got dredged up for me, being back in that emotionally-charged atmosphere. Perhaps being in the field always entails a great deal of self-reflection, especially for sociologists who I sometimes think study other people because they haven't been able to figure themselves out. But being in the field in a high school, and in particular asking about students' futures, allowed (forced!) me to reflect on my own high school experience and my own post-secondary pathway. It not only brought me back to my teenage years, in some ways it turned me back in to a student, as I re-learned how to sit in those *pupitres*, how to walk the halls, how to negotiate school rules for maximum flexibility, and learned for the first time how to cope in a mind-numbingly boring class and how to hide my texting.

The first time I went to school to recruit students for focus groups, I found myself strolling right in to the crowded cafeteria at lunch time and becoming immediately paralyzed, transported back to my own high school cafeteria. I quickly melted back against the wall to collect my thoughts, and realized that I was going to have to become what I wasn't in high school: popular. Not that I needed to be in the popular crowd – indeed, I wanted to avoid that because I wanted to talk to all the students – but I had to immediately create and put on a game face. I was going to have to go up and talk to



tables full of teens, unsolicited, and ask them to participate in my research. I hadn't even thought yet how they would see me (an issue I take up below: was I a teacher? A new student?) but if I had, that would have further complicated my thoughts. And as much as I did not want to do this – not least because my idea of being a good researcher in this school was that I needed to blend in and become unnoticed – there was a bit of a thrill at getting to re-live high school with the wisdom of years. *If only I'd known then*, I kept thinking to myself: I wouldn't have been so concerned with fitting in, with how I looked, with taking social risks. Perhaps this freed me to genuinely connect with groups of students I would not have gotten along with when I was their age. The sporty, beautiful, popular group who could be so cruel; the druggies; the disaffected, racist, vulgar group; in all of them I saw teens struggling to define themselves in a complex and difficult social world, their lives structured by forces out of their control. I came to empathize with them (even if they never knew it) in a way their teachers rarely did. I came to occupy the place of a Simmelian stranger. I did my best to fit in with the students, to almost become one of them, to blend in with them so that I could see the school from their perspective. I often succeeded, being mistaken for a student not just by other students but by substitute teachers and even teachers whom I knew. Taking the place of a student in the school was even more noteworthy because I had much in common with the teachers, and in fact could see myself becoming friends with many of them, if we had met under different circumstances. I was close in age to teachers – older, in many cases; had similar educational histories and interests in students' post-secondary outcomes; lived in the same neighborhoods and was a similar stage of life.

### *Learning to Weave*

My first few weeks at the school, I kept finding myself walking against the flow of traffic in the crowded hallways. No matter how much I tried to pay attention, I was just often wrong. By the end of the second year, I joked about it with Mike. He said to me, “Yeah I know, you weaved it. You’ve mastered the art of walking through NJHS hallways. It’s a talent, it really is a talent. [...] cuz if you like weave against one person then you weave against another and then you slowly end up on the left and you’re like, *oh no*.” At that moment I realized that the students themselves had to learn how to that too, when they first arrived at the school.

In that and many other ways, I had to learn the local culture of the school and figure out where I fit in. I felt that I engaged in nearly constant boundary work during my first few months in the school, negotiating where I fit, in what ways I would interact with teachers and students, whether I would be a rule-enforcer (I tried very hard and explicitly, mostly successfully, to avoid that role). I could go from being mistaken for a new teacher to being mistaken for a new student in the space of minutes. It finally occurred to me that teachers didn’t know where I fit either; many of them didn’t fully understand what I was doing there, and imagined I was doing an internship or student teaching of some sort. If I was a student teacher, I would rank below them. But as a PhD student, I might rank the same or even higher. Once I realized that they were as confused as I was about where I fit, I was better able to negotiate those relationships.

At the beginning, I tended to dress up a little bit, wanting to look professional, like someone who should be taken seriously. But it turns out that heels that clack on the

linoleum floors are highly conspicuous. Even skirts of any length made me seem too professional, out of place. It hit home one day, early on in the fieldwork, when I heard kids whispering to each other about “the lady with the clipboard”. I was shocked when I realized they were talking about me, and realized in that instant that I had seemed like a supervisor to them. Only supervisors and assistant principals wore suits, and while I never wore a suit, any outfit that looked even “casual Friday” put me slightly better-dressed than most teachers, and thus I stood out in an unforeseen way.

I realized I needed a new costume at school, and within days I passed a teacher at school who called out to me that I “blend right in with the students!” I called back, “That’s the idea!” and decided that that day’s outfit would be my new uniform: brown corduroy pants, a Rutgers zip sweatshirt over a scoop neck t-shirt, and flat loafers. I wore variations on that theme for the remainder of my fieldwork. A week later, a black boy I didn’t know called out to me in class, “Hey are you a new student?” I figured I had mastered the role at that point. I knew that my role, which I arrived at largely through trial and error, was important, because it would structure what kinds of data I would collect during my time at the school. For example, if I had asserted a more teacherly-like presence, I might have been able to hang out in the teacher lounge, and get a much different perspective on goings-on in the school. I know that there was teacher dissatisfaction with the principal, for example, and with rule enforcement more generally. By adopting a more student-like presence, I felt that I lost access to teacher-only spaces. Like students, I always waited to be invited to enter teacher-only spaces. I was terrified of the science teacher lounge, for example, and never went in there to talk to a teacher.

Because I didn't have access to a locker or any other place to store things at school, and students weren't allowed to carry backpacks, I had to get creative about what I carried. I never wore a coat to school, even when it was bitterly cold outside – I stuck to layers of sweaters, and sometimes a hat I could fit inside a 10x10 inch shoulder bag which became part of my uniform. I always fastened my school ID to that bag; I wanted it to be visible should anyone want to see it, but did not want to wear it around my neck on a lanyard, like the teachers all did. (Theoretically, students were supposed to wear their IDs as well; I never once saw a student wearing one.) I carried a bottle of water – but not too much, because it was tough to slip out to use the bathroom. I was continually surprised by how students would go eight hours without eating, drinking, or going to the bathroom. I also packed a couple extra pens; my cell phone, with which I quickly learned to text surreptitiously, like the students; a (contraband) pack of gum, which was important for getting me through very boring classes and for bonding with students; extra paper, for field notes; and professional newsletters to catch up on during down time, such as during an exam. I also fit my lunch – usually a pb&j sandwich, a granola bar, and a mandarin orange or two – in the bag, which meant that until lunchtime my bag was stuffed tightly. Finally, I carried a small vial of rubbing alcohol for my hands; the grossest thing about school is how dirty my hands were at the end of the day. Even so, I had colds for much of the first year, compounded by the fact that shadowing was mentally and physically exhausting, particularly at first.

*“She, Like, Follows Them. It’s Not as Creepy as it Sounds.”*

Pretty much every student at the school was welcoming of me, but they also pretty much all had a hard time figuring out what I was doing there and where to place me. As I overheard two girls whispering about me, “She, like, follows them. It’s not as creepy as it sounds. I asked someone last year.” As I noted above, I was constantly negotiating what role I would take at the school. I was the age and education of teachers, yet I wanted to see the school from the students’ perspective, which meant taking on more of the student’s role. In the end, I achieved a stable but careful balance which allowed me the freedom of movement in the school that the teachers had, with none of the responsibilities. My first week, one teacher asked my last name so he could tell students what to call me; I replied that I liked ‘Audrey’ better, and he agreed that that kept me in limbo. In a classroom, I could often hide and observe relatively unobtrusively. I tried hard not to draw attention to myself in such situations, for example by talking much in class, or by leaving for the bathroom. But I could also wander the hallways during class without trouble, and come and go as I pleased from class, and call students out of class (almost always study hall) to interview them. I was afforded many perks not available to students; for example, one day the librarian yelled shrilly, “Person in the purple shirt! Could you move!” When I turned around, she immediately got embarrassed and apologetic for having confused me with a student. Students nearby thought it was hilarious. Till the completion of fieldwork, I had to work hard to maintain this balance, as teachers often called on me to fill in for them – for example, when they needed to run to the bathroom themselves, or as an ally to get students to go to class. I carved out an in-

between space that really didn't exist in the school, with which teachers – and the security guards – were not particularly at ease (they wanted me to enforce rules, especially getting students to be in the right place at the right time). Both teachers and students tried to make an ally of me, and I worked hard to stay just a bit on the student side.

With students, I took on an almost therapist-like role at times; I became part friend, part listener, part fly on the wall. This varied by student, of course. Keyshia explained to her boyfriend that 'I don't have to talk to her, she's just here'. Others turned their conversation with me into a moment for self-reflection, like Toby: "uh I didn't realize that all that stuff was going on in my own life till I talked about it [laughs]". Sometimes students did not know how to respond to me, and felt uncomfortable asking, for example one day at lunch I saw Gracie's friend pass her a note that said clearly: DO NOT READ ALOUD. I wondered if it was about me, particularly when the friend expressed a great deal of curiosity about what I write down and what my notes look like. Gracie answered that I wouldn't show them to her, she asked once. All along I thought I had been so open about my notes, but apparently I was wrong!

Especially because I was interested in post-secondary planning, students tried to use me as a resource. In the most extreme form, they thought I could help them get in to Rutgers, an illusion I tried to quash firmly and quickly (by laughing with them about the idea that I had any control). It turns out that it was an advantage that I had gone to a college so far away that none of them had heard of, because that made me neutral in a way I would not have been if I'd grown up in New Jersey. Others used me to try to get out of class; Dan, for example, was constantly scheming to avoid class, and would

regularly ask me to walk with him to class so he wouldn't get in trouble for being late. I reached an agreement with him by which I would allow the teacher to see me with him in the hallway, but I would not lie directly on his behalf. One day he explicitly asked me to get him out of a class, and I was relieved to have the excuse that the library was closed for AP exams; I tried hard not to take advantage of the privileges I had in school and risk having the school delineate clearer rules for me.

Scheduling with students had to be done constantly on the fly, and keeping track of who I'd shadowed and interviewed proved to be a Herculean task. At the beginning, I tried to plan out when I would shadow ahead of time, and some teachers did ask me to give them notice in advance. But in practice, because I was juggling 17 different schedules, this largely proved impossible. Luckily, it also largely proved unnecessary. Most of the time, I tried to arrange with students to shadow the next day or the day after; occasionally they had preferences as to when I came, but often they said it was fine for me to just show up in homeroom on the day of shadowing. Sometimes, even when I planned ahead, a student would be absent or, rarely, not want me to come that day, and I would have two minutes to find someone else. I kept a printout of all 17 schedules so that I could do this as efficiently as possible. Texting with students proved critical to the success of the project; they often even texted me during class to schedule or reschedule.

*The IRB*

I was warned by many people that getting approval from the Rutgers Institutional Review Board would be tricky, since I was working in a school and with minors. I carefully and conservatively prepared a protocol application, and to my surprise the IRB administrator requested that I make a small revision and resubmit it as an “exempt” project. Evidently they did not see much legal liability in my project. They allowed me to passively consent all 11<sup>th</sup> grade parents by mailing a letter, and to actively consent only my focal students. Those who were over 18 could sign for themselves; those who were minors could bring me a parent signature. After the superintendent and the principal approved the research, I was set to begin.

But in practice, the ethical issues that arose were much more complicated than the IRB foresaw – which I was grateful for, in fact. Nearly every conversation with my dissertation chair during the course of the research involved some substantial discussion of research ethics. Some of them might have been predictable: for example, did I need to consent the teachers? The IRB and the principal didn’t think so. But one encounter with a teacher during the first year made me realize that teachers could feel coerced to allow me into their classrooms, and particularly when I took notes during those classes, they could feel vulnerable. This teacher told me she had asked students what I wrote in my notes, and it didn’t seem to her to match with what I said I was doing. A different teacher whose contract was not renewed at the end of the year expressed a disproportionate interest in my field notes and what I was recording; I believe that teacher was worried that I was evaluating the teaching, and that I might report my evaluations. Indeed, I often – especially at the beginning before I realized it – looked like a teaching evaluator: I was dressed slightly nicer than teachers, I sat in the back of the room, sometimes carried a



clipboard. I realized it was appropriate to formally consent teachers and to give them an opportunity, ahead of time, to deny me access to their classrooms. The problem became much clearer to me when I told the principal that I was going to consent the teachers so they had a chance to say they didn't want me in their classes without getting in trouble. He said, "Oh, they'll get in trouble! Just let me know if anyone has a problem with it". I thought to myself, *That is precisely the problem!* So in the fall of the second year, I consented all the teachers in whose classes I wanted to shadow students, visiting each teacher in person for usually 2-3 minutes to explain who I was (most of them already knew me) and what the research was about. I was worried that they would think it odd they had to sign consent for my second year when they hadn't for my first year; I explained (somewhat disingenuously) that "the Rutgers lawyers need this". One teacher asked me to defer visits to the spring semester. All the rest consented, and indeed, many expressed to me their appreciation for the confidentiality promise. The in-person consenting was excruciatingly long and draining, but it was worth it, and I wish I had done it for the first year as well.

### *Complex Issues of Consent*

An ethical issue I did not anticipate from the outset – but which became clear to me immediately on entry into the field – was the complexity of consent when dealing with teens in a school setting. The school setting, for one thing, is somewhat coercive, and students are used to complying with adult requests. So when I asked them to

participate, there was a strong demand characteristic for them to say yes. Heightening that was the fact that they were almost always physically constrained; I knew where to find them, and could show up to chat with them at any moment. On the other hand, most teens have been socialized to speak their minds, so I do not want to overstate the coercion. These interactions often manifested in a student's hesitation, a desire to say no but fear of hurting my feelings or making the research more difficult for me. I began early on including some "easy outs" that they could take to get me to stop asking them. For example, I routinely asked them whether they wanted me to come back and talk to them about it again, or to stop asking. Some took these outs and told me to stop asking. But without me providing that language, denying consent would have been much more difficult for them.

Compounding this difficulty is that teens can be disorganized, busy, distracted, or tired (especially when I approached most of them, during home room at 7:40 a.m.). So I had to suss out when a student appeared hesitant about or disinterested in the research, whether it was because they really wanted to say no but didn't want to hurt my feelings? Or was it because they really wanted to say yes but they weren't sure what their parents would say? Or were they simply not quite awake yet? All of these scenarios, and many more, actually happened. I had to walk a fine line, then, of constantly assessing whether I was pushing the student too hard or not hard enough. This process repeated, as well; for example, a student would consent to participate, then continually forget to bring the consent form with their parent's signature. Was that a strategy for saying no without appearing rude? Were they hedging or protecting their parents? Or were they really just forgetful and disorganized? A few students had such poor English that I wasn't sure how

much they understood about what the research entailed. One such student, Rishi, did participate as a focal student, and I was continually second-guessing and then reassuring myself about how much he understood. In June of his senior year, I heard that student telling his friend about me, in Gujarati. I asked what he told the friend, partly to check again that Rishi knew what the research was about. He said, “Write a book for Rutgers.” I figured that was about as much informed consent as I could hope for.

And even once I solidified my focal group of 17, we had to negotiate how and when shadowing and interviews would take place. Some students had a hard time saying no, for example to a request to interview them during study hall, even when they really wanted to study for an exam that period. I routinely had to add easy outs and remind them that it was ok for them to say no, to plan for a different day. This got easier with time; as they became more comfortable with me it was easier for them to say no. And then, there were students who were just so hard to track down that I had to use slightly stronger tactics to get them to an interview. It wasn’t that they didn’t consent, just that if I didn’t say, “You and me, today, 11<sup>th</sup> period!” they wouldn’t have shown up. This process of continually reevaluating “What constitutes ‘no’ from a teenager” in the field was ongoing and time-consuming, and eventually, as I got to know each of my 17 better, transformed into “What constitutes ‘no’ from *this* teenager”.

### *Confidentiality*

I promised confidentiality to the school, the staff, and to my focal students. But this turned out to be much more difficult in practice. What does confidentiality mean, when I am visibly following a student around at school? When I am sitting interviewing a student? “Who was in the study” became a topic of conversation among students and teachers alike. I quickly learned that teachers expected me to speak openly about which students I was following, even in front of other students (as they were accustomed to with other, theoretically private, student information). Clearly they knew about the student I was currently with, but they would frequently ask me “who else” or see me with another student and come up to chat about it. I tried to give as little information as possible, and attempted wherever possible to give redundant information: for example, if they knew that Joseph was in the study and they saw me with Keyshia, I would provide just those two names. Teachers and students alike sometimes disclosed this information to other students. One focal student made a contest out of figuring out who everyone was; I had told him I was aiming for 20 students, so he continually reported back to me how many of the 20 he had figured out. I agreed to confirm but not deny his guesses. By the end of his junior year, he was up to 13 (out of a true total of 17), and he lost interest over the summer.

The real implication of this is that I was able to keep secret the content of our discussions, but not the identities of the focal students. Students had complete faith in my promises of confidentiality, even to the point of naiveté. For example, one student was worried about being recorded in our initial interview, until I told him it was confidential and that only I would hear the tape. He said that was fine, that he didn’t worry about it if it was confidential – as if somehow I had invoked a sacred vow. (Of course I consider it a

sacred vow! But he hardly knew me, that's the point.) Occasionally my "confidential" rule got tested and reaffirmed in the field, usually by my focal students. For example, while sitting with Toby on the sidelines during gym class, another boy started talking about having just started Narcotics Anonymous. He glanced at me, and Toby reassured him he could say anything in front of me. Much later, with a different group of students, Toby was telling me about his police and drug trouble. Two girls kept looking at me incredulously, and finally said to Toby, "Why are you telling her all this??" I then introduced myself and said I was actually required to keep everything confidential, that I wasn't ALLOWED to tell. Yet another day, Gracie and her friends were pestering me for the worst thing anyone had confessed to me, and I reminded them about the confidentiality agreement we signed. Gracie said she was just testing me. In the end, I'm confident that students took my promise of confidentiality at face value. While our relationships evolved over the two years, and I did learn more details about some things, for the most part students were very straightforward with me, and told me what was going on in their lives. This rule was borne out by the exceptions: occasionally students told me that they did not want to tell me about some event or aspect of their lives. I usually asked them if they could tell me the type of thing they were leaving out (e.g., boyfriend trouble), and they did.

*Hawthorne Effects?*

As I was planning this study, one of my biggest concerns was the potential that I would change students' plans and planning processes simply by being in the field. What finally put my mind to rest and allowed me to move forward was a bit of advice I got: "Don't overestimate your importance to them." I think this is good advice, and largely believe it. But sometimes even small interventions make a big difference for students, and I made peace with the fact that I might make some of these small interventions. It is harder for me to see precisely what they were. For example, in an interview with a teacher near the end of the year, she commented, "what a presence you've been in the building the last few years!". I tried to figure out what she meant, but she went on to talk about the kids I shadowed. Similarly, I was joking around with two counselors one day and one said, "She's here, she's doing her thing, she's in the hallways, talking to kids, helping kids, blah blah blah." The other joked, "Who would want to help kids?" I responded that I wasn't sure if I was helping them, and she stopped, gave me a very serious look, and said, "Are you serious? Sometimes just by smiling at them, you're helping them." So while I tried most of the time to take on a fly-on-the-wall perspective – for example, when students asked me about the SAT requirements for getting in to Rutgers, I referred them to the Rutgers website – there are likely myriad ways in which I supported or even mentored students without knowing it. The very fact that I was paying attention to them and asking about their futures, for example, might have increased the diligence or seriousness with which students thought about their futures. But given that there is a wide variety of outcomes among the 17, I am not concerned that I unduly influenced them. Near the end of the study, Joseph commented to me: "You know, I like

how you give options but never tell me what to do”. I felt validated that I had succeeded in listening carefully without advising students.

## NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL

### *Selecting the School*

Though I was lucky to find a school that was nice to be at, and this facilitated my research in untold ways, it was not the reason I chose the school. My choice of school was driven by theoretical considerations which emerged from my reading of the literature and drawing on findings from my interviews with the counselors. I drew up criteria for the sort of school I knew would most facilitate my theoretical questions, for a strategic research site (Merton, 1973). I began with the list of 250 public high schools in the 12 central New Jersey counties from which I drew counselors. First and foremost, I sought a school with *no majority or predominant post-secondary destination*. Next, I eliminated outliers along a number of variables<sup>33</sup>. This resulted in a short list of eligible schools, at several of which I had interviewed counselors and inquired about the possibility of conducting ethnographic research. I formally requested permission from two of those schools, and was declined. Finally, I wrote a cold letter to the principal of a third school

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<sup>33</sup> Detailed description of these variables is impossible without compromising the confidentiality of the school.

and, in less than a week, had received permission by email for my research through the superintendent.

Flabbergasted by the quick turnaround, I was convinced that the district did not really understand what I was asking to do. I emailed the principal for a meeting, and found him amenable to whatever I wanted to do. He offered to introduce me to the faculty at the first meeting in the fall, and to arrange for a school ID so I could come and go as I pleased. From that point on, the school assisted me in every aspect of the research, from allowing me to sit in on classes, to providing a conference room for interviews, to letting me hang out in the library during down time.

### *The Feel of NJHS*

I was lucky enough to find a school that I actually liked going to every morning. In this dissertation, I critique a number of the institutional structures that shape life at NJHS. But I want to be clear that this is a school I think measures up well against most common standards, a school filled with kind teachers who are doing their best by their students. It is a school I would be happy to send my own children to. From my first moments there, I was struck by how friendly and chatty and cheerful the faculty were, and how open the students were to my presence.

The two-story school sits in a suburban neighborhood, with major thoroughfares a couple of blocks away on either side. They were close enough for kids to cut lunch and get Wendy's or Dunkin' Donuts, but not visible from the school, which was surrounded



by playing fields and medium-sized single-family homes. There was a doorbell to ring at the front entrance – like many schools – but unlike many schools the doors were often unlocked. The school had security guards, who wore polo shirts and slacks; sometimes one of them was in the front lobby, but there were never police and there was no metal detector. The floor plan allowed students many routes between points, and students had individual preferences: go the long way, the short way, outside, inside.

During passing period, the hallways were noisy and packed with students, who presented a strikingly diverse mix of races and ethnicities. It was not uncommon to hear Spanish, Gujarati, and Mandarin – nearly half of the students did not speak English at home. Students weren't allowed to carry backpacks, because of the overcrowding. There was often a traffic jam at the major hallway intersection, so students frequently travelled from one class to another by going outside and then back in another (unlocked) entrance. In the halls were the typical trophy cabinets – mostly from many years ago – and above the lockers, honors art students each got to paint a 3x4 foot mural when they graduated. This lent a happy, vibrant feel to the place. The school is not new, but is in mostly good repair. The bathrooms were not pleasant – teachers complained that someone put a paperclip on the floor in the staff bathroom in September, and it was still there in May. A newer wing included spacious arts and music classrooms, which supported the popular and competitive band and choir programs. Classrooms were often crowded – occasionally I had to sit on the floor – but lively and decorated.

*The Stats on NJHS*

More than one student at NJHS thought I should call the school “United Nations High” for its striking racial, ethnic, nationality, and socioeconomic diversity. NJHS also has solid academic programs and a broad range of student post-secondary destinations. It is located in a city in the metropolitan fringe of New York City, and has graduation rates<sup>34</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade test scores close to the state average.

As shown in Appendix A, Table 1, the racial/ethnic diversity at NJHS is not typical of U.S. schools, but it is not unique in New Jersey (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008; New Jersey Department of Education, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Approximately one third of the student body is identified as Asian, with a significant South Asian/Indian population. Less than half of the student body is identified as white, and about one in 7 or 8 is identified as Hispanic or white.

This data obscures the actual complexity of race/ethnicity at the school, however; for example, a huge percentage<sup>35</sup> of students considered themselves of mixed

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<sup>34</sup> Graduation rates are notoriously difficult to measure, and reported rates can vary by as much as 40 percentage points depending on the method of calculation. For example, most states calculate a “leaver rate”, which only counts as dropouts those students who are *documented* as dropping out; clearly not all students who drop out do so through official channels (EPE Research Center, 2007b; Heckman and LaFontaine, 2008). New Jersey reported a statewide average of 92% in 2006-2007. The National Center for Education Statistics reports a graduation rate of 85.1% in New Jersey compared to the national average of 74.7% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> But these data are not collected. Out of the 57 students who came to focus groups, about half indicated more than one race/ethnicity; representative answers were “all of Europe”, “black and Puerto Rican”, “Arab/Pakistani”.

race/ethnicity, and many identified themselves by their or their parents' national origins. "Indian" garnered its own category, rather than being subsumed by "Asian". Few students that I know of identified as "Hispanic", and then generally only in formal discourse; on the ground, anyone who spoke Spanish or whose parents spoke Spanish was considered to be "Spanish". (Indeed, someone told me about a student whose parent actually was Spanish: "he's actually Spanish like España Spanish". Students and teachers alike were proud of the race/ethnic diversity of the school; students felt it prepared them for "the real world" where they assumed (likely incorrectly) that they would face similar diversity.

NJHS sent students to a wide variety of post-secondary destinations, about 40% of graduates to two-year colleges and another 40% to four-year colleges<sup>36</sup>, as shown in Appendix A, Tables 2 and 3. A hefty portion of the 2010 graduating class went on to Rutgers, and virtually all of the students attending two-year colleges went to the local County College. Almost all students went to colleges within the state.

It is important to note that post-secondary outcome data is collected by the guidance office as student self-reports during the spring of the senior year; those reports are then compiled by the state Department of Education. These numbers are of variable validity and reliability across schools, and there is incentive for schools to inflate the number of college-going students. Some schools do a better job of checking these reports against applications, and tracking which applications were accepted or denied (particularly those who have access to software like Naviance). NJHS got Naviance in the

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<sup>36</sup> The range is wide to protect the school's confidentiality.

late spring of the students' senior year, and the head counselor made a good attempt to record all of the seniors' applications and acceptances. There is also pressure for individual students to inflate their outcome, and there are never any validity checks after the fact. So these data more precisely represent students who claim in May, as vetted by counselors, to be headed to each destination in September. Data on which specific colleges students planned to attend was also self-reported by seniors in May to counselors at the school. I obtained these data directly from a counselor.

New Jersey High School is located in a diverse city with a large and diverse immigrant population, and major industries including universities, medical centers and pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, retail, and food and other product processing, not to mention easy commutes to New York City. This economy supports both high-education, high-income and low-education, low-income workers. As seen in Appendix A, Table 5, the median household income is above the national average, but about one in five students is eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

In educational terms, New Jersey can in some sense be seen as a case study of broader national trends. It has one of the highest graduation rates in the nation, and consistently ranks well in preparing students for college (EPE Research Center, 2007a). In that way, the question of which students attend which types of post-secondary schools (and which do not attend at all) is even more salient at NJHS, an academically solid school in a high-ranking state. But the state also has a large racial gap in access to higher education and in outcomes, with whites twice as likely as non-whites to enroll in college. It also has one of the largest economic gaps in the nation, with rich students more than twice as likely as poor students to attend (The National Center for Public Policy and

Higher Education, 2006b). NJHS allowed me to explore those trends in detail within one school.

## WHERE MY DATA COME FROM

### *Getting to Know the School*

In the fall of 2008, I had students help me stuff envelopes with letters to all the 11<sup>th</sup> grade parents (about 500), explaining what the research was about and who I was. These letters allowed parents to opt their children out of participation in the research, by telling school staff or me. I did not hear from anyone, though over the course of the time I was at NJHS I spoke to a handful of parents (at basketball games and the like) who vaguely remembered the letter. Of course students might have chosen not to talk to me without my knowledge. My research began with informal observation in 11<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms when teachers invited me to attend class. I met students and began to get a sense of friendship groups, academic tracking, and the pace of life at the school. Next I conducted 12 focus groups with a total of 57 juniors (more than 10% of the junior class, broadly representative of the student body in terms of race, gender, grades, and social groups). I recruited students at lunchtimes in the cafeteria, intentionally soliciting friendship groups (which facilitated the conversation in the focus groups) (Cerulo, 2005). The school allowed me to pull students from classes for these groups, and provided an empty classroom in which to conduct them.

These groups introduced the students to me and helped me understand strengths and weaknesses of the school from the students' perspective, sketch students' social networks, and map the landscape of cliques and status. They also effectively introduced me to the students, spreading word about who I was and establishing me as an unthreatening non-teacher presence in the school. All but one of the focus groups were recorded (the bane of an ethnography is forgetting the recorder!); I took notes during the all of the sessions and wrote field notes immediately afterward to record non-audio data (and dialogue, for the one unrecorded session).

### *Focal Students*

In January 2009, I began recruiting a group of juniors to shadow and interview for the duration of their junior and senior years. These 17 students allowed me to shadow them through a full school day (Rubin, 2007) once per semester, and interview them three times – midway through their junior year, in the fall of their senior year, and at the conclusion of their senior year.

The sampling design for these focal students was a hybrid of purposive and random sampling (Babbie, 2001; Kalton, 1983; Yin, 2003) that allowed me access to the population of interest while minimizing personal bias. I began with the class roster ranked by GPA, and selected out the top and bottom deciles of the class (for reasons I discuss in Chapter 1). I also excluded the focus group participants, to avoid resampling them, to maximize the number of students I knew in the school, and because they may

have differed from the general student body precisely in their interest in participating in the research<sup>37</sup>. From the remaining middle 80%, I drew a primary sample of 30 names, and two extra samples of 15 names each. I began soliciting each of the 30 students from the first sample, and when I had exhausted that list, dipped in to my second and third samples.

This random selection resulted in a sample which captures the breadth of student experiences, including variation by gender, race/ethnicity, SES, and grades, as well as personality, school activities, interests, and hobbies. I achieved a final sample of 17 out of 52 recruited (33% participation rate). I consider this a successful participation rate; students were asked to allow a relatively high and intensive access to their school lives, to participate for nearly two years, and to convince their parents to go along with it, all with no explicit reward (financial or otherwise). A few participants dropped out very early in the study – one during the first day of shadowing, and one immediately after; they are counted as declining to participate – but otherwise I kept all 17 students in the study through the end of high school. I therefore consider the attrition rate to be essentially zero.

I approached students primarily during homeroom, where I gave a 2-3 minute summary about the research and handed them a glossy red Rutgers folder with a consent

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<sup>37</sup> Although two focus group students did make it in to the final sample. One (Ken) gave me his nickname in focus group, so I inadvertently left him on the roster, and he was randomly selected. I didn't realize the error until I was face-to-face with him asking him to participate in further research, and he eagerly accepted my offer. While shadowing, I cross-referenced students I saw in class against my focus group sample. I found that I was missing a key demographic of working-class, low track white boys, who were much more likely to decline to participate in the research. I therefore added one such student (Toby) whom I knew from attending a focus group.

form and a description of the research to share with their parents. I invited them to meet me at study hall or after school to talk more about what the research entailed. The random selection became even more important at this stage as a means of explaining to students who was invited to be in the research, because being selected immediately became bragging rights for some students, and many others asked to participate. One proudly explained to his questioning peers that “I represent juniors!” Others who were not selected would frequently call out to me, “Miss I’m waiting for my red folder!”

The 17 students can be seen at a glance in Figure 3 in Appendix B, Figure 1, which displays the students’ gender and self-reported race/ethnicity in a GPA decile by post-secondary outcome table. At the close of high school, eight were enrolled in four-year colleges in New Jersey; five of those were enrolled in selective colleges (like Rutgers or more selective, per Barron’s rankings). Six were enrolled or planning to enroll in County college. One had dropped out, was working full time, and planned to get his GED. One girl, who had a six month old baby, had no immediate post-secondary plans, and one boy finished high school and immediately went to work full-time. A brief description of each of these students is included in Appendix B.

*Shadowing.* Shadowing meant that I typically met students at homeroom in the morning, and went with them for their entire school day. Often I sat next to the student when there was space in the classroom, but my preferred seat was at the back, where I could more clearly see the classroom, and blend in a bit more. Then I would walk with the student to the next class, sit with them at lunch, and finally part after the last class of the day. The first time shadowing students, they were often a bit nervous about how it would go. Some



were extra-conscientious to make sure that I had a seat in their classroom, introducing me to their teachers (who generally already knew me), pointing out things of interest about the school. Others seemed to forget I was there, and especially before I became good at navigating the crowded hallways, I was worried about losing them. After the first shadowing, students relaxed and I became much more a normal part of their school day; we reached a second level of relaxation when I showed up again in the fall of their senior year.

Shadowing allowed me true ethnographic access to students, because I was able to pop in and out during the school day as necessary. While during my true shadowing days I was at school for a full seven hours, the majority of my trips to school were much shorter – one period for an interview, just the five minutes of homeroom where I became quick enough to consult with several different students about when I would shadow or interview them. In a typical week, I made 10 or more trips to school, varying in length from five minutes to the full school day. Most importantly, shadowing gave me access to different social locations within the school; I was able to observe and take notes on a wide variety of classroom and hallway interactions for a long period of time. Many of the insights and analytic focus in this dissertation feature classroom interactions I observed while shadowing focal students, but not necessarily involving the focal students.

I entered the field with the intent to study “how students figure out what they do after high school”; this was both the description I gave to students and staff at the school and the cognitive framework with which I entered the field. I did not know what would end up being important, so I tried to stay open to anything that seemed of interest. In particular, I was looking for how students’ daily practices and interactions created

pragmatic or cognitive frameworks in which particular post-secondary paths seemed logical. I asked students about their interactions with guidance counselors and teachers, and observed such interactions when I could.

I entered the field with a number of guiding questions rather than with specific hypotheses I was looking to prove. I knew that I did not know, a priori, what the important events or processes would be in regular kids' post-secondary planning. I paid attention to anything that I thought might help me answer the following questions:

- Does a “middle of the road” high school like NJHS provide a “middle of the road” counseling timeline, or does it provide a bifurcated process to student subgroups? Are privileged students getting institutional attention that matches what demographically similar students get in higher-performing schools, while poorer students miss out?
- How are parents involved? What knowledge, beliefs, and values do they bring to the post-secondary planning process? How do they acquire that knowledge, and to what extent do they use it in advising their children?
- What knowledge, beliefs, and values do students bring to the admissions process? How do students acquire that knowledge, and how do they use it in negotiating with their parents and in setting their goals?
- What roles do peer networks play in shaping students' knowledge, practices, and aspirations?
- What financial resources do parents bring, and what impact does that have on students' educational preparation, aspirations, and educational and occupational outcomes?

- What are the institutional practices of schools that help move students through this process? How do schools conceptualize the process, and what are their goals for their students? To what extent do high schools see it as their responsibility to help prepare students for life after high school?
- What information is disseminated by the schools, through workshops, formal meetings with parents, counseling meetings with students, and informal transmission in class or through social networks?

Not all of my questions got answered. In particular, my questions about the family and home life of students, and the role of financial resources, are ripe for further research.

*Interviews.* Interviews occurred almost exclusively at school during study hall or after the school day. I started out conducting interviews in a school conference room, but that quickly became logistically difficult (I had to request to use it each time) and felt quite formal. I found the library a nice place to go with students. I worried at first that our conversation would carry in a quiet library, and thus not be particularly private. But the library was often surprisingly loud, and audio privacy was never a problem. Meeting in the library also allowed me to be visible to many people at once, which was both useful for the research and for the pragmatic reason that I did not want to appear to be alone or in secret with students. The drawback was that anyone could easily see who I was interviewing, so student privacy was not strictly feasible. None of the students seemed to care.

Interviews were often finished within one 42 minute period but very frequently would extend to a second (and occasionally even third) period on another day, sometimes

as soon as the next day but other times as late as a month later, depending on the student's availability<sup>38</sup>. Interviews were recorded (and though students could opt out, none did), and I took fieldnotes immediately afterward to record conversation before and after the interview, noting my rapport with the student, and other details not captured in the recording (Emerson et al., 1995). In addition to the 51 interviews with focal students, I conducted about 10 additional interviews with students who showed a great amount of interest in participating in the research. Interview schedules are appended; I asked students about their aspirations and preparation for post-secondary education, including their courses, extracurricular activities, jobs and other responsibilities, test scores and any other college- or employment-related preparation. I asked them about their friends and their families and their goals and their support systems. Finally, I also talked with each student's counselor privately about their high school experience and post-secondary planning<sup>39</sup>.

I accompanied half of the focal students on tours of their neighborhoods, where they showed me places they regularly go (like the mall) and places of importance in their lives. Sometimes I drove and sometimes I rode with them. These tours were a chance to hang out with students more informally outside school and to chat more freely. I recorded our conversations, the longest of which was about six hours. I generally bought a meal while we were out; students felt somewhat awkward about this, until I reassured them

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<sup>38</sup> First round interviews, 5 of 17 extended across two or three days; 2<sup>nd</sup> round, 10 of 17, and 3<sup>rd</sup> round, 3 of 17.

<sup>39</sup> Except in the case of one counselor, who had gone out on leave. For each of that counselor's students, I chose one teacher to speak with who seemed to know the student best.

(somewhat disingenuously) that Rutgers was paying<sup>40</sup>. Students were frequently nervous about these encounters before they happened – I was still something like a teacher, perhaps? – but they were quite positive about the interaction afterwards. The tours helped cement our relationships, and I generally developed a close relationship with students who took me on a tour.

Half of the students also arranged for me to interview a parent, in the spring of their senior years. I waited to schedule these interviews in order to ensure that I first had rapport with the students (Bettie, 2003). I regret that I was not able to speak to more parents, and believe it was due in part to how I asked. I wanted students to feel in control and to be able to refuse my request to interview their parents, so I asked through them. This resulted in parents not really knowing what I was asking for and being confused about whom I was and what I wanted (even though they had consented for their child to participate in the research). Even parents who did eventually do an interview with me frequently opened by saying they didn't really know what I wanted to talk to them about. I think the decision to keep students in control was a good one, but I wish I had independently sent a letter to the parents requesting an interview so they knew more about what I wanted and did not have to rely on the information filtered through their child. The interview schedule is appended.

I also interviewed 29 school staff members, including teachers, two assistant principals and the principal, two directors of guidance, and two guidance counselors. In the first year, I interviewed each of the retiring teachers. I delayed the rest of my

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<sup>40</sup> One student even mistakenly thought that my offer of gas money should he drive us on the tour was a *request* for gas money should I drive us on the tour!

interviews to the spring of the second year, to ensure I had first established a good rapport with students and to prevent students from thinking I had an alliance or friendship with teachers (Bettie, 2003). This was effective strategy because it was difficult enough to establish my role in the school, and delaying prevented me from becoming closer to teachers than I was to students. I solicited teachers with whom I had a good rapport, seeking a sample that captured the variation I saw in teacher attitudes and perspectives. Then I ensured that I had a good representation in my sample by number of years teaching experience and subject matter, recruiting extra teachers to fill these gaps. The sample is thus skewed toward teachers who I met in shadowing and who regularly taught 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades; it is not a random or statistically representative sample. These teacher interviews are represented only in passing in this dissertation; full analysis will have to wait for now. The interview schedule is appended.

*The counselors.* The first phase of data collection involved interviews with 28 high school guidance counselors in New Jersey in the spring of 2008. These interviews focused on how they and their schools engage in post-secondary planning. The public school counselors were selected using a stratified random sampling procedure. From each of the 12 geographically central counties in the state (see Figure 1), I randomly selected approximately 10% of public, four-year high schools from the complete roster publicly available from the New Jersey Department of Education. Once a school was selected, I sought a complete list of counselors at that school by visiting the school website, and then randomly selected one counselor to solicit for an interview. Sometimes this was the director or supervisor of guidance, and in a few cases the counselor referred me to

another counselor in the office. A few additional interviews were conducted by referral. Two interviews were conducted with local independent (private) school counselors, contacted through personal networks. This resulted in a 76% response rate (71% of cold calls). Interviews lasted from 45-120 minutes, averaging about an hour. All but two interviews were audio recorded; I took extensive notes during those two, and wrote detailed reconstructions immediately afterward.

Interviews were transcribed and then coded in a pen and paper process that involved reading for emerging themes. Analysis of those themes across cases allowed me to sort schools into two ideal types (high-college-sending and low-college-sending) and analyze common themes within each type (see Chapter 2). These interviews also provided me with a broad sense of the variation in organizational structure and student population at New Jersey schools, and helped me select an appropriate school at which to continue ethnographic research.

When I quote counselors in this dissertation, I identify them anonymously by their school; for example, the counselor at public school S is simply called “Public-S”. I use the counselor as a proxy for school practices, acknowledging that there is likely some variation among counselors in the same school, and that what counselors describe to me may not in fact be what actually takes place. I draw on publicly-available, school-level state data that includes graduation rates and post-secondary plans (see Appendix C, Table 6) to order schools by their four-year college-going rates. For example, Public-A sends 86% of its students on to four-year colleges, while Public-Z sends 23%. The private schools, which send all of their students to four-year colleges, are identified separately as Private-A and Private-B.

*Follow-up interviews.* Follow-up interviews with the 17 focal students is a key part of the long-term research plan. The first wave of follow-up, two years out, is currently underway. Through these interviews, I can see if students ended up where they thought they would be, and what they did in the two years after high school. Data from these interviews are not included in this dissertation, but an interview schedule is appended.

### *The Utility of a Random Sample*

I considered several alternate sampling methods, among which the most commonly-used is selecting students to fill cells in a table (for example, race BY gender BY socioeconomic status). I might, for example, have aimed for a sample that included one boy and one girl each in a white/black/asian by working class/middle class/upper class sort of distribution. There are some apparent advantages of this approach; primarily, it allows the appearance of *controlling on or for* some variable and thus implies that differences can be causally attributed. It seems the equivalent of accounting for correlated variables in a regression model. In my research, I believe that this would have allowed a false sense of generalizability and a false sense of causal attribution. The contribution of ethnographic research is the way it can dive deep into one case and illuminate patterns that might or might not resonate in other cases. In other words, I can tell you a lot about how NJHS did post-secondary planning and how that played out in the lives of 17 of its students, and I think that those analytical insights are helpful for understanding post-



secondary planning in a much broader sense. But my insights are not particularly helpful for pinning down whether race or SES is more important in shaping a student's pathway.

My instinct before beginning research was that a rigid cell-based sampling method would not work, and it quickly became clear that initial hunch was correct; race and SES function at NJHS in a much more complex way than a rigid sampling frame would allow. For one thing, such a sampling frame is theoretically problematic, due to the well-known difficulties inherent in operationalizing race and SES, especially among high school students (Jones, 2008; Shamah and MacTavish, 2008), and would have been impossible in practice, if only because individual level data about NJHS students' race and SES do not exist. Further, the focus groups I conducted during the fall allowed me to understand that this method would not have worked out in practice because I would have been imposing a priori categories with which students don't identify. For example, I estimate about half of students identified with more than one racial group, and students' social networks at the school are highly racially integrated. Selecting students in to a white/black/asian cell would have meant inappropriate reductionism that went against the grain of students' own experiences. Further, many students did not understand what "graduate school" meant in describing their parents' educations; some shared my understanding, but others did not. Consider this exchange with Antonio:

Antonio: Graduate school is what?

ADE: anything after college

Antonio: ok, so [my mom] didn't graduate but can I still put yes cuz that, like she's in Lincoln Tech. Job description, she graduated college, to be an accountant but she's also going for either MA or MAA so put both?

It would not have been possible to figure out what students' "real" SES was. My direct random sampling thus forsakes the (largely false, in this instance) appearance of generalizability to instead highlight the breadth of student experiences across the school, and allows me to draw new insights about how students understand their own identities and how that shapes their social networks and post-secondary planning. Indeed, I think that the closer you look at any one student's life, the more difficult it is to see how that life represents a category, because the details become much more important. Students themselves generally did not think of their post-secondary planning as stratified by race or SES or gender; forcing that framework upon them might seem to make things analytically more clear but I believe would actually have prevented me from seeing some of the nuanced patterns I observed.

### *Data Processing and Analysis*

I am grateful for National Science Foundation funding that allowed me to have audio transcribed concurrently with my second year of field research. My transcriber returned files to me very quickly, so that I had access to most interview texts while still in the field, and could refer to them as I continued data collection. The more time I spent at school, the higher the quality of data I collected and the better my rapport with students. NSF funding allowed me to continually reassess my findings, evaluate emerging themes, and refine my observational goals and interview schedules for subsequent rounds.

During particularly busy times in the field, I resorted to dictating field notes and having them transcribed. I wish, in retrospect, that I had used this method for all my field notes. What began as a last resort to make sure I got all my shadowing completed resulted in the most detailed, vibrant field notes I have. Writing field notes is painful, as most ethnographers know. The pressure of not having to write everything down freed me to be very complete in my recorded field notes, which I then edited after transcription. Other fieldnotes I wrote as soon as possible when leaving the field – often but not always within 24 hours. I was always able to take detailed notes while in the field. Since I was in a classroom setting, it was easy to keep a small pocket-sized notebook and jot notes throughout the day. I often drew diagrams in my fieldnotes, which I later scanned and included in the text files. In the end, I had about 1,050 pages of fieldnotes, not including interview transcriptions.

I analyzed this data primarily through an iterative reading process. I used Atlas.ti to help me organize the fieldnotes, but I coded the interview transcripts by hand and highlighter. I kept research notes with emerging themes and analysis, and re-read with those in mind. The research design allowed for constant comparison, evaluation, and triangulation. Because I followed a group of students in repeated waves, I was continually and repeatedly forced to examine my assumptions, test my hypotheses, and evaluate the fit of my developing theory against new data from other students. Interviews with teachers and parents allowed further triangulation. Quotes are edited for readability (for example, I often cut false starts and repetitions, and almost always cut out my own minimal positive responses like yeah, uh huh), while maximally maintaining the tone, intent, and meaning of the research participant.



## Appendices

### Appendix A. NJHS Statistics.

*Table 1. NJHS race/ethnic data<sup>41</sup>.*

Asian	30%
Black	13%
Hispanic	14%
White	43%

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<sup>41</sup> Numbers and years are rounded and to maintain the school's confidentiality.

*Table 2. NJHS Post-secondary plans (graduates' self-reports)<sup>42</sup>*

4-year college/univ.	40%
2-year college	40%
Military	1%
Apprenticeship/full-time work	6%
Undecided	7%

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<sup>42</sup> Numbers and years are rounded to maintain the school's confidentiality.

*Table 3. Selectivity of colleges that NJHS students plan to attend*

NJHS Students Plan to Attend Schools like:	Barron's Selectivity	Percent <sup>43</sup>
American University, Brown University, Columbia University, Boston University, The College of New Jersey	most competitive / highly competitive +	4%
Rutgers-New Brunswick, Stevens Institute of Technology, Northeastern University	highly competitive	27%
University of Delaware, Drexel University, Rowan University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Seton Hall University	very competitive + / very competitive	9%
Kean University, Montclair State University, Rider University, Temple University	competitive + / competitive	15%
Saint Peter's College, Kent State University, DeVry University	less competitive	4%
County College	noncompetitive	35%
Total		94%

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<sup>43</sup> Outcome data obtained from a counselor at NJHS; based on Barron's 2009 selectivity ratings. Percents do not add to 100 because some schools are unranked (such as art colleges).

*Table 4. NJHS HSPA Proficiency<sup>44</sup>*

	Partial	Proficient	Advanced
Language Arts Literacy	15	70	15
Mathematics	25	50	25

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<sup>44</sup> Numbers are rounded to protect confidentiality.



*Table 5. City socioeconomic profile.*<sup>45</sup>

Free & reduced lunch eligible	21%
Poverty level	8%
Median household income	\$80,000
(U.S. Census Bureau)	

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<sup>45</sup> Numbers are rounded to maintain the school's confidentiality.

## Appendix B. Focal Students.

### *Short descriptions of each student.*

Below, I provide a quick summary of the 17 focal students around whom these data were compiled. When I first incorporated students into the study, I asked them to fill out a basic demographics sheet (see Appendix E) including three words they would use to describe themselves. I found students' self-descriptions to be universally insightful and accurate, so I include them first here. (A few left this blank, so in those cases I have made my best guess about what they would have put.) I also include my description of the student, details about each student's place in the school and their family, their post-secondary plan at the close of high school, and what they are doing two years out of high school.

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**Ali** described himself as “shy, friendly, cool”. He was quiet in school, sticking with a select handful of friends, and meticulous about his appearance (one day, when he was wearing sparkling white pants, I watched him lay down fresh printer paper on every desk chair before he sat). Ali was in the lowest track and took HSPA classes in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and again, after he failed the test, in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. He was in the 7<sup>th</sup> decile. In June, everyone was holding their breath until his third-try passing math score was returned. Ali is the only student who did not self-identify his race or ethnicity; all four of his grandparents

were US-born and I classify him as black. Ali transferred to the school in the middle of 10<sup>th</sup> grade when his stepdad was laid off from a manual labor job; financial problems persisted and his home life was stressful and volatile throughout high school. He lived with his mom, stepdad, and much younger stepbrother; at one point all four of them were living in his aunt's living room. Ali was often tired and sad, and couldn't wait to move out. Ali was outed as gay before he started at NJHS, which he was unhappy about; he was continuously in difficult romantic relationships. His father, with whom he had limited contact, died shortly after graduation. Ali hoped to become a medical technician on the way to becoming a doctor, but left high school with no specific plans. In the fall, he enrolled in a for-profit school and got his med tech certification. Two years later, he was still sleeping on the couch in his family's 1-bedroom apartment.

**Antonio** described himself as “apprehensive, caring person, funny”. He was quite moody, sometimes sullen and withdrawn, other times courteous and gregarious. Antonio moved to the district in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and seemed to court volatile friendships. He was classified as learning disabled, but in some ways was the most socially mature of the group, for example asking me “adult”-like questions about how I was getting along with my husband. Antonio was in the lowest track classes and took HSPA-prep classes before failing and then being exempted from re-taking. He was in the 9<sup>th</sup> decile. He said he is ½ Puerto Rican, ½ Italian Polish Russian; both his parents and one of his grandparents were born in the US. He lived with his mother and her girlfriend and her son, about 10 years younger. His mother had a volatile relationship with his father, who ultimately committed suicide. Antonio's social security (inherited from his father) and his mom's disability

checks helped the family pay the bills. At the close of high school, he planned to go to County. In the fall, he failed four of five remedial County classes, dropped out, and enrolled in a medical certification program with a for-profit school.

**Dan** described himself as “different, surprisingly intelligent, lazy”. He was a smart student who was a major thorn in his teachers’ sides. Shadowing him was always whirlwind as he was constantly on the make, strategizing about getting out of work. Dan said he was black ( $\frac{1}{2}$  Jamaican and  $\frac{1}{2}$  Portuguese); both his parents and all four grandparents were born in Jamaica. He was an athletic student who thought he was better than most of his peers and had few friends, though he probably could have been popular if he’d wanted it. He took mostly honors and AP classes and aced tests without studying. Dan hovered at the edge of the top 10 percent of his class. His dad had multiple masters’ degrees and his mom was an RN; he also lived with his older sister and younger brother. Dan wanted to be a plastic surgeon, but failed to complete any college applications. He attended County for one semester the fall after he graduated, and has since worked nearly 10 different jobs in different sectors.

**Gracie** might have described herself as sarcastic, opinionated, and practical. Gracie had a biting wit she often hid from her teachers. Slightly overweight, Gracie was always more self-conscious about her makeup, hair, and accessories than I expected for a nerdy girl. She was not easily impressed by her peers, and kept a small circle of close friends. She told me she only went to school events she organized, like dodge ball for charity. She said she was white/Irish, and all four grandparents were US-born. She was in the 7<sup>th</sup>

decile, and took mostly Level 1 classes. She lived with her mom – a restaurant manager – in a house they inherited from her grandfather; her father died when she was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She identifies as bisexual and had a “kinda-sorta” girlfriend as a junior. Her counselor got very involved in her college plans, and she ended up at Dominican College<sup>46</sup> on scholarship. She would have liked to study sociology or philosophy, but since she didn’t have a lot of money to play around with, decided on a 5-year MBA program. On track to graduate, she is now thinking about law school.

**Hanna** described herself as “pretty ☺ helpful, friendly”. Hanna was quiet in school but much more sociable outside. A tall, thin, pretty girl, Hanna spent much of her day in the ESL classroom which became something of a community for new students. She was two years older than her peers, and found herself in a very different stage of life. Hanna’s parents moved her from Hong Kong before 11<sup>th</sup> grade in order to prepare her for college in the US. She repeated two years of high school in order to improve her English. She took intense ESL classes and improved her language skills considerably over the time I knew her; math and chemistry classes were repeats of what she did years before in Hong Kong. She was in the 5<sup>th</sup> decile. She described her race as “asia”; all her family was from Hong Kong. She was an only child, and her parents helped run family restaurant here. She desperately missed her life in the big city, not just the bustle but also her friends – her parents gave her less than a month’s notice about the move, and she left behind a

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<sup>46</sup> Throughout, I replace actual college names with an allovariant (Zerubavel, 1993; 1991). Since most NJHS students go to colleges in New Jersey, I chose New York state colleges, with similar levels of Barron’s selectivity, matching public/private.

longtime boyfriend she would have married if she'd stayed. Hanna wants to study business, and went first to County to continue working on her language skills. She plans to transfer to Rutgers.

**Henry** described himself as “friendly, caring, funny”. A boisterous, outgoing boy, Henry desperately struggled to fit in at school. He joined, and then quit or was excluded from, myriad clubs and groups. He frequently fibbed or exaggerated to gain social acceptance. Henry was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decile in mostly Level 2 classes; he was exempted from the HSPA. Henry said he was Asian, and only his father was born in the US. His parents’ separation continued to be traumatic for him through high school; he alternated homes every two weeks. His parents both finished high school, and his mother worked as a bookkeeper and his father as a custodian at Rutgers, a source of embarrassment for Henry. Henry dreamed that he would attend Rutgers and become a doctor, and it was a great disappointment to his family that he did not get in. He attended County after graduation.

**Jorge** described himself as “hard-headed, sensitive, kind”. He was a funny, quirky student who found himself somewhat between worlds – sometimes sporty and “ghetto” (as he put it) and sometimes nerdy (he played violin in the orchestra). He attributed this to having one Spanish parent (actually from Spain), and one Filipino parent. He was involved in a lot of school activities – tennis, yearbook, orchestra, ballroom dance club. Of all the students, he took the decision to be part of the study most seriously, mulling it over a period of weeks before deciding he could be open with me. Jorge was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> decile, and took mostly Level 1 classes. None of his parents or grandparents were born in

the US. He lived with his mom, dad, and older sister, and religiously watched the World Cup with his dad. His mother was a physician's assistant, and his father struggled with a physically-demanding job due to childhood polio. Jorge had long wanted to be a nurse, like his long-term girlfriend Robin (who coincidentally was also among the focal students), and on whom he relied for a lot of college planning and general organizational help. He commutes to Ithaca College on scholarship after being rejected from Rutgers-New Brunswick.

**Joseph** might have described himself as outcast, funny, and laid back. Joseph was the kid other kids were afraid of, because he wore a black trench coat in school and did role-playing games online (often with his father). His sense of humor was quirky and in some ways he liked playing up the “weird” kid vibe. He began to thrive in the drama program at NJHS, where he came to lead the improv group, though his performances were inconsistent. He was in the 6<sup>th</sup> decile; he was declassified into Level 1 courses his junior year. Joseph slacked off too soon his senior year, and there was a mild panic about whether he would fail an elective math class and have his Rutgers acceptance rescinded. He also missed the deadline to audition for Mason Gross, where he had hoped to major in theater. He identified as Egyptian, Irish, and Polish; his mother was born in Egypt. Joseph lived with his parents, his younger sister, and his maternal grandfather. His mother was an accountant, and his father owned his own business; both went beyond college. He did attend Rutgers in the fall, and lived on campus.

**Ken** described himself as “flexible (personality), friendly, ‘follower’”. A quiet, studious student, Ken was very excited to participate in the research. Ken hung out almost exclusively with other Chinese-speaking honors students. He thought about playing tennis, but never quite made it happen, and thought about getting a job, but didn’t want it to conflict with Rotary volunteering; he enjoyed the school’s tai chi/meditation group. The most rebellious I saw him was playing poker during study hall with his chemistry classmates. By his senior year, Ken was in the 1<sup>st</sup> decile. He took almost all honors and AP courses, and in fact was annoyed about a schedule conflict that prevented him from taking AP Statistics in addition to Calculus. Ken said he was Pacific Islander, and emigrated with his family from Taiwan in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. His parents still primarily speak Mandarin. He lives with his parents and older sister. Both parents went to graduate school, and his dad made electrical chips while his mom stayed home. Ken loved History and English, but was accused of betraying his cultural roots and chose the Rutgers School of Engineering, where he attended on an EOF scholarship.

**Keyshia** described herself as “nice, outgoing, sweet, funny”. She was all those, but she could also be antagonistic, aggressive and moody. She was smarter than her placement in the lowest tracks could account for, and she became willful when she was bored in class. Keyshia was popular and dominant in her large group of girlfriends. Keyshia was in the lowest decile. She was placed in remedial HSPA-prep classes because, she said, she never realized the practice tests determined her placement; she had no trouble passing when she took it seriously. Keyshia said she is African American, and her parents and grandparents were born in the US. She lived mostly on her own with her brother, 1 year



older, in a house her dad owned. Her dad had two other babies who lived elsewhere with their moms, and her senior year he moved in with his pregnant girlfriend. Her mom also recently had another baby who she got to see a lot. Her parents were both in high school when Keyshia was born; they finished but took a long time. She got along with them reasonably well, aided by their closeness in age. A small family fight ensued when Keyshia became pregnant; her son was born in December and she returned to school after a maternity leave. She felt well-supported by her parents and her boyfriend and his family, and soon the three of them took over an apartment her dad had rented. She hoped to enroll in college someday.

**Lea** described herself as “outgoing, imaginative, and weird”. A popular girl, Lea was involved in school spirit activities, was in selective choirs and got parts in the school musicals, and participated in ballet, jazz, and step dance outside school. She says she chose classes she was interested in rather than those that challenged her academically. Still, she was good at science in particular, and had dreams of becoming an Air Force pilot. Lea was in the 4<sup>th</sup> decile. She said she was Asian and Hispanic, a combination that made her feel lonely (in fact, she pointed out that Jorge was the only other person “like her” that she knew). Her mother emigrated from the Philippines and worked as a nurse; her father was an EMT among other things and had gone back to college later in life. None of her grandparents were born in the US. She lived with her mom and her younger brother, and saw her dad frequently. Her parents, though divorced, get along. She felt that she was exactly like her dad and so they clashed a lot. Lea also had two older siblings by another father, with whom she had limited contact. She spent a lot of time with her large

extended family, and felt she could count on them more than her friends. She worked 20-25 hours a week at the same job throughout high school, and for most of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades had a steady older boyfriend. She moved to NJHS in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to avoid the schools in her hometown which was mostly Spanish. Lea went to a SUNY college.

**Maya** described herself as “funny, crazy, unpredictable”. A vivacious pretty blond girl, Maya was not very connected to school but spent a lot of time with her family and a large, close group of church friends. Maya was much more reserved in school, and preferred to be working, 20-30 hours per week as a nanny. She was in the Art Honors Society and wanted to be an elementary school art teacher. Maya was in the 5<sup>th</sup> decile, in mostly Level 1 classes. She said she was “German, Italian, Irish, Filipino, Spanish, Hungarian”; all her grandparents were US-born. She lived with her mother and younger brother; her father died after a long illness, during which she was home-schooled, when she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She started at one of the NJHS feeder middle schools until her mom remarried, and they moved in with him in another district. She moved back to NJHS for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. She shared a room during that time with her mom, because her aunt and cousins also lived with them. She was in a long term relationship with her brother’s best friend, whom she planned to marry after college and have many children with. She was highly active in church mission trips. Her mom, who married and had her very soon after she graduated from NJHS, hoped Maya would go to college first but otherwise took Maya’s plans very seriously. Maya went to a SUNY school for a semester, took on \$10,000 in debt, and transferred back to County where she expects to complete her AA three years after graduating from NJHS.

**Melina** described herself as “loyal, sweet, social”. A short, curvy girl with meticulously manicured nails –when she had the money – Melina handles her problems privately. She moved from Brooklyn at the beginning of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and didn’t ever make a whole lot of friends at NJHS. She spent a lot of time with her family, and enjoyed her long-term job at a daycare center but continually battles to get enough hours there. She was in the 8<sup>th</sup> decile with a 2.2 GPA, and she took primarily Level 2 classes. Her grades went up dramatically when she moved as she did not have friends to gossip with in class, and she was proud of her achievements, particularly in math. Melina said she was Hispanic, and lived with her parents and a younger sister; her father also had two young children in an affair. Only one parent was born in the US; her mom was attending college and working as an assistant in a doctor’s office, and her father was a truck driver. At graduation, Melina had vague plans to attend County, but would have preferred the two-year college her mother attended, for a change of scenery. She regretted not going applying to any four-year colleges, but thought she wouldn’t have gotten in anyway. She felt she could have done better in high school if she had been more on the ball all along, and if she’d had better support from her counselor and her parents.

**Mike** described himself as “nice, funny, uh?” He was a bit of a class clown, a popular kid who became cool his senior year and enjoyed prominent roles in the high school musicals and improv group. Mike was in the 7<sup>th</sup> decile, and dropped from Level 1 to Level 2 halfway through his senior year. Mike said he was white (Italian and Irish), and both his parents and two grandparents were born in the US. He lived with his mom, sister, and

aunt, and had an older sister. He also had two younger step-siblings who lived with his dad. His father was a salesman who had gone to college; his mother graduated high school and worked as a cook. His home life was troubled due to conflict between his parents, and his counselor spearheaded Mike's college search. Mike dreamed of owning a dinner theater, and attended a SUNY school.

**Rishi** described himself as "I like talk with my friend. I like play cricket and math."

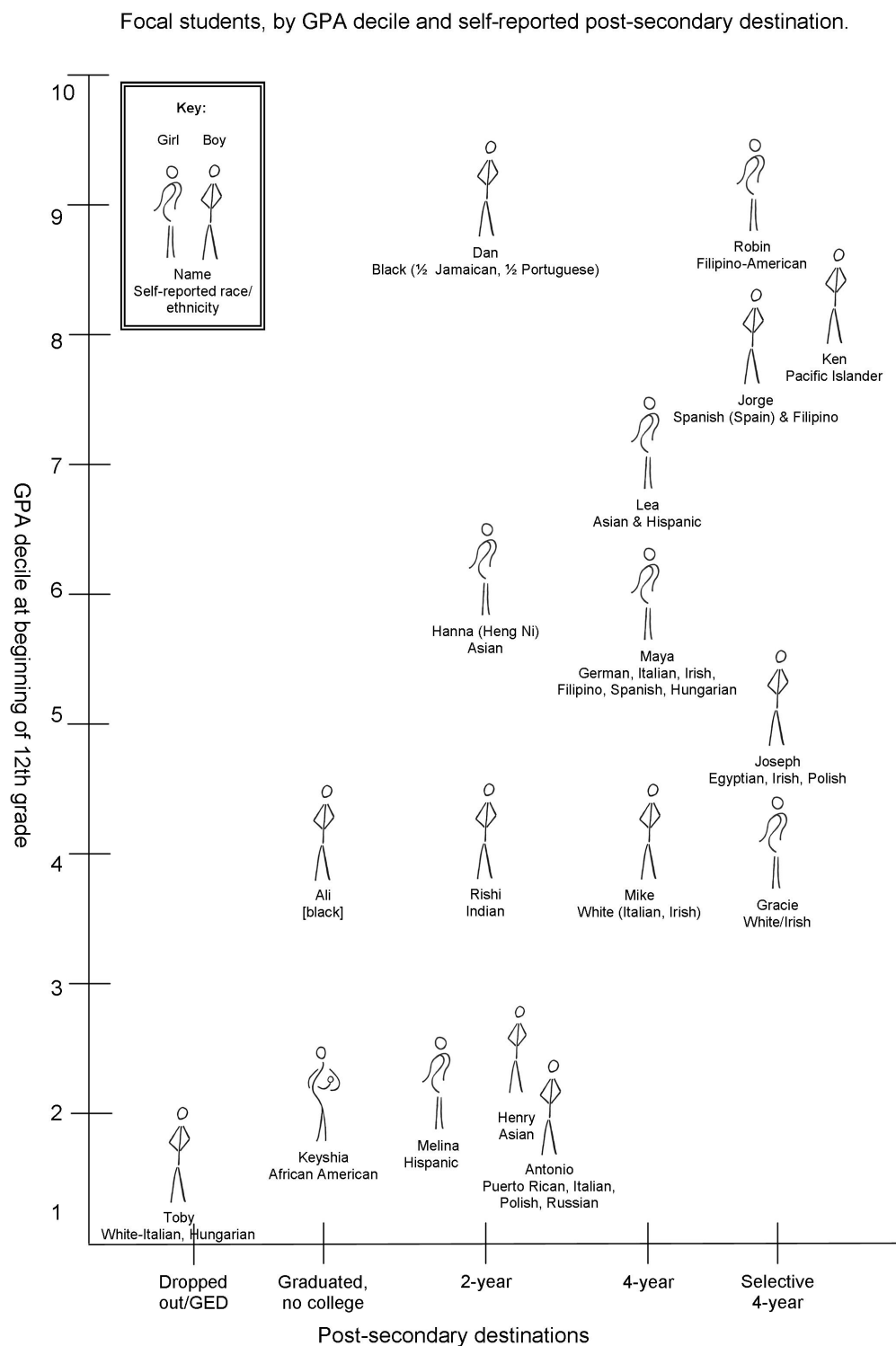
Rishi's English was limited because he moved from India in 10<sup>th</sup> grade with his mother and sister (his father was already in the US). Rishi was always meticulous groomed and dressed, and frequently checked his hair in mirrors and windows. He almost always had headphones in one ear, listening to Indian music. He became close friends with a group of other Indian boys, several of whom were in ESL classes with him, and who attended the same temple. I only heard him speak English with me and his teachers. Rishi was in the 7<sup>th</sup> decile in primarily Level 2 classes. In the US, Rishi lived with his parents and sister; they left two older, married sisters behind with a large extended family that owned an electronics appliance store. His father heard a religious call to come cook for the large temple near NJHS, and the family spent many hours there every day. Rishi's counselor and ESL teacher surmised that he had learning disabilities that were masked by his limited English proficiency. He was two years older than his cohort, but if they had tested him for disabilities when he first arrived he could have stayed in the high school until he was 21. He did finally pass the alternate high school assessment and graduate on time. He hoped to attend Rutgers but was denied; he was very excited about being admitted to County.

**Robin** described herself as “nice, friendly, open minded ??”. A small, quiet girl, Robin enjoyed leadership positions at school (like editor of the yearbook) but was not popular and did not want to be. She played tennis and violin, too. She disdained the rowdiness and immaturity of her peers, and preferred the people in her Honors classes her junior year to the people in her Level 1 classes when she dropped down her senior year. She described herself as Filipino-American. She was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decile. She lived with her parents, two sisters (one older and one younger), and her grandmother. Her parents both went to college and worked as med techs; she wanted to be a nurse, though her parents would have preferred doctor since her older sister was already going to be a nurse. Though she got along well with her parents, she struggled to carve out an independent role; she considered failing her driving test on purpose so they would have to let her live in the dorms at college rather than commute. Her long-time relationship with Jorge (coincidentally also a focal student) was secret from her parents for a long time. She attended Ithaca College on scholarship (and lived in the dorms!) after being waitlisted at a SUNY school.

**Toby** described himself as “relaxed, crazy, loud”. A stoner who hung out with who he called “the failures”, Toby was often high in school. His life was tumultuous, and his physical appearance mirrored that: sometimes he was lively, witty, and well-kept, sometimes bleary-eye, disheveled, and depressed. Toby was in the lowest decile in mostly Level 2 classes; he dropped out once in 11<sup>th</sup> grade for a few days, returned, then dropped out again in the spring of his senior year. Toby said he was white (Italian and

Hungarian) and both his parents were born in the US. He lived with his mom and stepdad and three adopted/fostered toddlers; his father, who struggled with addiction, lived down the street. Toby's stepdad did manual labor until he was laid off, and Toby's mom was an office secretary before going out on disability. Neither parent went beyond high school. Toby did not get along with his parents, and was in frequent trouble with the police. He signed with the Marines, but was dropped after he was put on probation. Toby never wanted to go to college; he dreamed of doing diesel mechanics, and had worked at an auto body shop since 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Toby got his GED the fall after he would have graduated.

Figure 1. Focal students, by GPA decile and self-reported post-secondary destination.



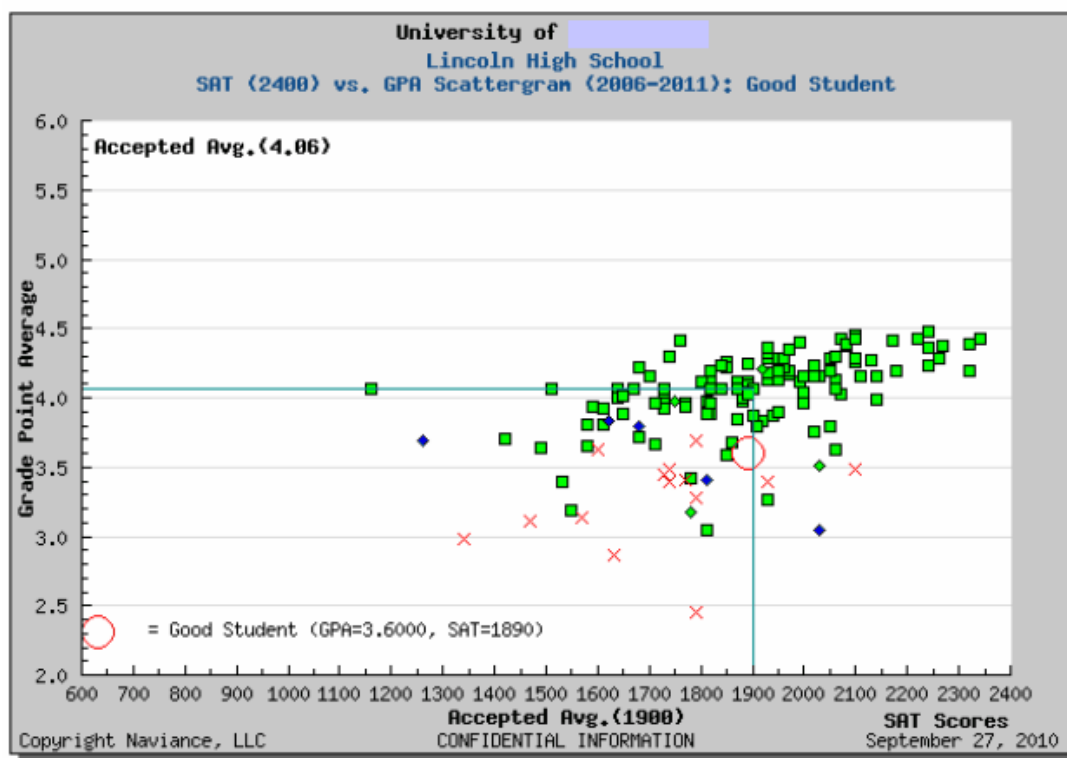
*Appendix C. Counselors data.*

*Figure 2. New Jersey counties from which counselors were sampled. Rutgers marked, in Middlesex County.*





Figure 3. Sample Naviance spreadsheet.



**Graph Legend**

- Accepted
- × Denied
- ◆ Waitlisted or Deferred
- ◆ Waitlisted or Deferred (Accepted)
- ◆ Waitlisted or Deferred (Denied)

Table 6. Post-secondary plans for graduating seniors, 2007.

| School    | four-year<br>college or<br>university | two-year<br>college or<br>university | Other<br>college | Other post-<br>secondary<br>school | Military | Full-time<br>employment | Undecided | Other<br>(including<br>unknown) | Graduation<br>rate |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|----------|-------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Private-A | 100.0                                 |                                      |                  |                                    |          |                         |           |                                 | 100?               |
| Private-B | 100.0                                 |                                      |                  |                                    |          |                         |           |                                 | 100?               |
| Public-A  | 86.1                                  | 7.5                                  |                  | 1.1                                |          | 1.1                     | 0.9       | 3.4                             | 97.9               |
| Public-B  | 84.0                                  | 9.0                                  | 2.2              | 0.2                                |          | 0.2                     | 4.2       |                                 | 99.5               |
| Public-C  | 80.3                                  | 12.9                                 |                  | 0.7                                |          | 3.4                     |           | 2.7                             | 97.8               |
| Public-D  | 77.2                                  | 18.1                                 |                  | 0.4                                | 0.6      | 2.8                     | 0.9       |                                 | 98.3               |
| Public-E  | 73.4                                  | 19.1                                 |                  | 1.1                                | 0.4      | 3.2                     | 0.9       | 1.9                             | 98.6               |
| Public-F  | 72.0                                  | 19.6                                 |                  | 2.6                                | 0.9      | 4.4                     |           | 0.5                             | 96.7               |
| Public-G  | 71.4                                  | 23.1                                 |                  | 3.3                                | 0.3      | 1.9                     |           |                                 | 97.3               |
| Public-H  | 69.2                                  | 21.0                                 | 4.9              | 0.7                                |          | 4.2                     |           |                                 | 97.4               |
| Public-I  | 69.2                                  | 20.9                                 | 2.7              |                                    | 0.7      | 3.8                     | 2.7       |                                 | 96.7               |
| Public-J  | 68.5                                  | 20.7                                 | 2.0              |                                    |          | 7.8                     |           | 1.0                             | 100.0              |
| Public-K  | 66.2                                  | 31.3                                 |                  | 0.4                                | 0.4      | 1.0                     | 0.6       |                                 | 99.4               |
| Public-L  | 66.2                                  | 23.7                                 | 1.8              | 0.2                                | 1.2      | 4.8                     | 1.2       | 0.9                             | 95.3               |
| Public-M  | 63.0                                  | 30.0                                 |                  | 3.5                                | 0.9      | 2.6                     |           |                                 | 98.3               |
| Public-N  | 62.9                                  | 25.6                                 |                  | 3.3                                |          | 3.0                     | 5.2       |                                 | 97.1               |
| Public-O  | 61.5                                  | 29.3                                 | 0.9              |                                    | 0.4      | 3.5                     | 1.2       | 3.2                             | 97.3               |
| Public-P  | 60.0                                  | 19.3                                 |                  | 8.1                                | 2.2      | 0.7                     | 9.6       |                                 | 95.1               |
| Public-Q  | 59.5                                  | 32.9                                 | 2.3              |                                    |          | 5.3                     |           |                                 | 98.9               |
| Public-R  | 49.2                                  | 38.5                                 | 0.8              |                                    | 5.3      | 1.2                     | 2.5       | 2.5                             | 87.8               |
| Public-S  | 48.5                                  | 34.0                                 | 4.2              |                                    | 1.4      | 1.6                     | 10.3      |                                 | 96.2               |
| Public-T  | 46.7                                  | 30.1                                 |                  |                                    |          | 23.1                    | 0.1       |                                 | 85.4               |
| Public-U  | 46.1                                  | 42.6                                 |                  | 2.0                                | 1.3      | 4.4                     | 0.4       | 3.1                             | 94.2               |
| Public-V  | 44.3                                  | 42.9                                 |                  | 9.3                                | 1.4      | 2.1                     |           |                                 | 100.0              |
| Public-W  | 43.9                                  | 27.7                                 |                  | 4.7                                | 1.4      | 22.2                    |           |                                 | 99.6               |
| Public-X  | 39.5                                  | 36.2                                 | 5.2              | 3.3                                | 3.0      | 8.2                     | 4.1       | 0.5                             | 88.4               |
| Public-Y  | 25.4                                  | 41.3                                 |                  | 9.2                                | 0.8      | 12.5                    | 10.8      |                                 | 88.2               |

|          |      |      |     |      |
|----------|------|------|-----|------|
| Public-Z | 22.8 | 69.7 | 7.6 | 94.2 |
|----------|------|------|-----|------|

---

*Typical counseling calendar composite.*

Key moments in the 4-yr application process

Working backwards from 12<sup>th</sup> grade:

|                                            |                                              |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| December – February 12 <sup>th</sup> grade | Most applications due for four-year colleges |
| Oct/Nov/Dec 12 <sup>th</sup> grade         | SAT administered (“last chance”)             |
| March/May/June 11 <sup>th</sup> grade      | SAT administered (“first time”)              |
| January 11 <sup>th</sup> grade             | 12 <sup>th</sup> grade course scheduling     |

Typical Schedule for 60+%-4yr (Schools A-Q)

9<sup>th</sup> grade – focus on transition to high school

10<sup>th</sup> grade – career & interest inventory

11<sup>th</sup> grade

|             |                                                      |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| October     | Take PSAT (along with many 10 <sup>th</sup> graders) |
| January     | Parent college planning night                        |
| Jan - March | Meet 1-1 with students and discuss:                  |

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 12<sup>th</sup> grade course scheduling</li> <li>- Post-secondary plans (visiting colleges, SAT/ACT, making application list, getting letters of recommendation, summer plans)</li> <li>- Distribute ABC's book</li> <li>- Meet or attempt to meet 1-1 with parents</li> </ul> |
| March/May | Take SAT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

### 12<sup>th</sup> grade

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fall                    | 1-1 drop-in or small group meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Application submission instructions</li> <li>- Deadlines (apps, SAT/ACT)</li> <li>- Manage application list and expectations</li> </ul> |
| October                 | Take SAT 2 <sup>nd</sup> time                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| September –<br>December | College reps visit school                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| November                | Financial aid night (for parents)                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| By January              | Track applications, and often track results (often using Naviance software)                                                                                                                                          |

### Typical Schedule for <50%-4yr (Schools R-X)

9<sup>th</sup> grade – focus on transition to high school

10<sup>th</sup> grade – not much

11<sup>th</sup> grade

|             |                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| October     | Take PSAT (along with many 10 <sup>th</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> graders)                                                        |
| Jan - March | Meet 1-1 with students and discuss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 12<sup>th</sup> grade course scheduling</li> </ul> |
| Spring      | Whole-class or large-group meeting on post-secondary plans                                                                      |

Overall: “not much to say” (Public-T)

12<sup>th</sup> grade

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fall                    | 1-1 meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Making application list</li> <li>- Deadlines (apps, SAT/ACT)</li> <li>- Manage application list and expectations</li> </ul> |
| October                 | Take SAT (2 <sup>nd</sup> time?)                                                                                                                                                  |
| September –<br>December | On-site CC placement tests<br><br>College fairs                                                                                                                                   |
| November                | Financial aid night (for parents)                                                                                                                                                 |

*Typical planning timeline suggested by counseling associations.*

### Freshman

- Plan a challenging program of classes
- Get involved in activities & enrichment programs

### Sophomores

- Meet with your counselor to talk about college planning, standardized testing, AP exams, and junior year courses
- Continue activities & enrichment programs

### Juniors

#### September

- Think about your college goals, interests, and abilities
- Plan senior year course schedule with your counselor
- Investigate PSAT/NMSQT

#### October

- Take PSAT/NMSQT

#### November

- Keep your grades up

#### December

- Review results of PSAT/NMSQT with your counselor

#### January

- Decide what type of college you want and what factors are important
- Plan your SAT I/II testing schedule with your counselor

#### February/March

- Make a list of colleges to explore, with your counselor
- Start exploring via College Fairs, websites, etc.

#### April

- Take the ACT
- Visit colleges

May

- Take the SAT I

June

- Another chance to take the ACT or SAT
- Continue visiting colleges

July/August

- Study for the SAT and register for fall test dates
- Continue visiting colleges

### Seniors

September

- Meet with your counselor to make sure your college list is appropriate
- Meet with teachers regarding letters of recommendation
- Continue visiting colleges

October

- Start preparing applications
- Keep your grades up

November

- Continue filing applications & meeting with college representatives

December

- Finish filing applications
- File the FAFSA

January

- Keep your grades up
- Attend financial aid information session

February

- Monitor applications for completeness

March/April



- Monitor applications
- Attend Open House programs at colleges

May

- Decide where you'll go
- Inform colleges you're declining
- Take AP exams

June

- Request your school counselor send your final transcript

July/August

- Look for new student information from your college

## Appendix D. New Jersey Colleges

*Table 7. New Jersey Institutions of Higher Education - Two-year institutions (all open-access).*

| College name                     | Annual tuition | Per credit tuition | Student Body | Student: Teacher ratio (x:1) | % living on campus |
|----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Assumption College for Sisters*  | \$ 4,950       |                    | 40           | 2                            | n/a                |
| Atlantic Cape Community College  | \$ 2,500       |                    | 6,815        | 18                           | n/a                |
| Bergen Community College         |                | \$ 98              | 14,600       | n/a                          | n/a                |
| Brookdale Community College      |                | \$ 108             | 12,724       | 17                           | n/a                |
| Burlington County College        |                | \$ 73              | 8,000        | 24                           | n/a                |
| Camden County College            | \$3,000        | \$ 83              | 14,737       | n/a                          |                    |
| County College of Morris         |                | \$ 96              | 8,500        | 25                           | n/a                |
| Cumberland County College        | \$3,220        | \$ 84              | 3,400        | 23                           | n/a                |
| Essex County College             | \$2,832        | \$ 88              | 10,435       | 24                           |                    |
| Gibbs College*                   | \$12,000       |                    | 1,200        | n/a                          |                    |
| Gloucester County College        | \$2,304        | \$ 77              | 5,863        | 20                           |                    |
| Hudson County Community College  |                | \$ 82              | 6,400        |                              |                    |
| Mercer County Community College  |                | \$ 102             | 13,000       | 21                           |                    |
| Middlesex County College         |                | \$ 113             | 12,000       | 21                           |                    |
| Ocean County College             | \$3,450        | \$ 88              | 8,889        | 22                           |                    |
| Passaic County Community College |                | \$ 78              | 7,084        |                              |                    |
| Raritan Valley Community College |                | \$ 87              | 6,200        |                              | n/a                |
| Salem Community College          | \$3,500        | \$ 83              | 1,300        | 15                           | n/a                |
| Sussex County Community College  |                | \$ 82              | 3,299        | 18                           | n/a                |
| Union County College             | \$2,712        | \$ 87              | 11,166       | 25                           | n/a                |
| Warren County Community College  | \$3,263        | \$ 86              | 1,800        | 16                           | n/a                |

Data are from the 2008 magazine "Going to College in New Jersey", published by NJ Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (NJ HESAA, a state office).

\* private colleges

Table 8. New Jersey Institutions of Higher Education - Four-year institutions.

| College name                       | Annual tuition | Student Body | Student: Teacher ratio (x:1) | % living on campus | Selectivity | SAT Middle 50%: Critical Reading/Math           | Average High School GPA | % students in top quarter of HS class |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Berkeley College                   | \$ 18,140      | 2,729        | 22                           | 10                 | 60          |                                                 |                         |                                       |
| Beth Medrash Govoha~               | \$ 13,052      | 5,100        | n/a                          | 24                 |             |                                                 |                         |                                       |
| Bloomfield College                 | \$ 18,000      | 2,100        | 15                           | 29                 | 71          | 380 - 470 / 390 - 470                           | 2.63                    | 32                                    |
| Caldwell College                   | \$ 22,000      | 2,291        | 12                           | 41                 | 71          | 440 - 520 / 430 - 530                           | 3.03                    | 14                                    |
| Centenary College                  | \$ 23,100      | 2,662        | 16                           | 59                 | 69          | 410 - 500 / 410 - 500                           | 2.7                     | 28                                    |
| College of Saint Elizabeth         | \$ 22,547      | 1,982        | 12                           | 64                 | 65          | 360 - 470 / 370 - 470                           |                         | 27                                    |
| DeVry University~                  | \$ 6,450       | 1,500        | 16                           |                    | 61          | (not listed)                                    |                         |                                       |
| Drew University                    | \$ 34,230      | 1,600        | 12                           | 94                 | 85          | 500 - 630 / 500 - 610                           | 3.42                    | 71                                    |
| Fairleigh Dickinson University     | \$ 27,620      | 12,112       | 15                           | 80/65              | 74          | 450 - 560 / 460 - 570<br>400 - 500 / 390 - 490* | 3.11                    | 40                                    |
| Felician College                   | \$ 20,500      | 2,000        | 13                           | 25                 | 61          | (not listed)                                    |                         |                                       |
| Georgian Court University          | \$ 21,678      | 1,868        | 14                           | 22                 | 68          | (not listed)                                    | 3.22                    | 29                                    |
| Kean University                    | \$ 8,505       | 13,000       | 16                           | 12                 | 72          | 400 - 500 / 420 - 520                           |                         | 27                                    |
| Monmouth University                | \$ 23,034      | 6,000        | 15                           | 44                 | 80          | 480 - 560 / 500 - 580                           | 3.4                     | 55                                    |
| Montclair State University         | \$ 8,895       | 16,076       | 17                           | 27                 | 72          | 440 - 530 / 460 - 550                           | 3.2                     | 39                                    |
| New Jersey City University         | \$ 8,155       | 10,000       | 14                           | 1                  | 79          | 390 - 480 / 410 - 490                           |                         | 38                                    |
| New Jersey Institute of Technology | \$ 4,850       | 8,209        | 13                           | 29                 | 74          | 470 - 580 / 540 - 650                           |                         | 55                                    |
| Princeton University               | \$ 33,000      | 4,760        | 5                            | 97                 | 99          | 700 - 790 / 710 - 800                           |                         | 99                                    |

|                                                               |           |        |        |     |    |                       |      |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------|--------|-----|----|-----------------------|------|----|
| Rabbinical College of America~                                | \$ 9,700  | 240    | 17     | 100 |    |                       |      |    |
| Ramapo College of New Jersey                                  | \$ 9,965  | 5,600  | 17     | 60  | 87 | 490 - 600 / 520 - 620 |      | 55 |
| Rider University                                              | \$ 25,650 | 5,790  | 13     | 66  | 79 | 460 - 570 / 480 - 580 |      | 43 |
| Rowan University                                              | \$ 10,068 | 9,600  | 12     | 35  | 81 | 490 - 580 / 510 - 610 |      | 53 |
| Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey - New Brunswick** | \$ 10,614 | 36,888 | 14     | 50  | 77 | 520 - 630 / 560 - 680 |      | 72 |
| Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey - Newark**        |           |        |        |     | 72 | 460 - 560 / 500 - 610 |      | 53 |
| Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey - Camden**        |           |        |        |     | 72 | 480 - 582 / 490 - 600 |      | 48 |
| Saint Peter's College                                         | \$ 23,426 | 3,000  | 14     | 44  | 78 | 412 - 520 / 420 - 530 | 3.21 |    |
| Seton Hall University                                         | \$ 27,850 | 8,600  | 15     | 82  | 80 | 470 - 570 / 470 - 580 | 3.13 | 50 |
| Somerset Christian College~                                   | \$ 8,620  | 140    | 10     | n/a |    |                       |      |    |
| Stevens Institute of Technology                               | \$ 34,800 | 1,850  | 8      | 70  | 95 | 560 - 640 / 620 - 700 | 3.83 | 88 |
| Talmudical Academy~                                           | \$ 9,200  | 52     | n/a    | n/a |    |                       |      |    |
| The College of New Jersey                                     | \$ 10,776 | 5,961  | 13     | 63  | 90 | 550 - 650 / 580 - 680 |      | 89 |
| The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey                    | \$ 9,696  | 7,213  | 17     |     | 75 | 470 - 570 / 490 - 600 |      | 56 |
| Thomas Edison State College                                   | \$ 6,250  | 13,173 | n/a    | n/a | 61 | (not listed)          |      |    |
| UMDNJ, School of Health Related Professions                   | \$ 4,500  | 1,200  | varies | n/a |    |                       |      |    |

|                                |          |        |    |    |    |                       |    |
|--------------------------------|----------|--------|----|----|----|-----------------------|----|
| William Paterson<br>University | \$ 9,996 | 10,600 | 16 | 30 | 67 | 440 - 550 / 460 - 550 | 31 |
|--------------------------------|----------|--------|----|----|----|-----------------------|----|

Selectivity, SAT, GPA, and top quartile data come from [www.theprincetonreview.com](http://www.theprincetonreview.com) in June 2012. All other data are from the 2008 magazine "Going to College in New Jersey", published by NJ Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (NJ HESAA, a state office). I noted and corrected some errors, but did not systematically fact-check this data.

\* math / writing scores

\*\* HESAA listed all three Rutgers campuses together. I separate them here, and add differentiated selectivity data.

~ Not accredited by Middle States, though Somerset Christian College is a candidate for accreditation. DeVry University has "regional accreditation".

## Appendix E. Interview schedules.

### *Student demographics form.*



I'd like to know a few things about you for this research. Every question is optional – just leave them blank if you don't want to answer. All your answers are confidential; no one will see them except me.

FIRST name: \_\_\_\_\_

What are 3 words you would use to describe yourself to a new friend?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender?

\_\_\_\_\_

What do you consider your race(s)/ethnicity(ies)/ancestry?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How many older siblings do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

How many younger siblings do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Were both your parents born in the United States?

both one neither

How many of your grandparents were born in the U.S.?

0 1 2 3 4

Did your mother/parent #1:

graduate from high school? YES / NO

NO

go to any college? YES / NO

NO

graduate from college? YES / NO

YES / NO

go to any graduate school? YES / NO

YES / NO

Did your father/parent #2:

graduate from high school? YES /

go to any college? YES /

graduate from college?

go to any graduate school?

Job/occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Job/occupation:

Who do you live with? List all:

\_\_\_\_\_

How can I contact you?

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (home): \_\_\_\_\_ (cell): \_\_\_\_\_

Email/IM: \_\_\_\_\_



*First Student Interview (winter 11<sup>th</sup> grade)*

Tell me about what you did yesterday, from the time you got up to the time you went to bed.

Was yesterday a typical day or an atypical day? [If atypical: What would a normal day be like?]

- how do you get to & from school?

Tell me about your classes.

- likes and dislikes
- academic and elective
- thoughts about teachers
- the workload (how difficult, like or dislike)
- grades

What about your friends? Who do you hang out with the most?

Are you in a “clique” here at the high school?

What are some of the other cliques here? Do you ever talk to people in them?

What do you usually do during lunch?

- where do you sit/eat
- with whom
- buy or bring? what food?

What kinds of things do you do after school?

- organized activities
- work

- extracurriculars/sports
- homework

What do you do on weekends?

- religious attendance?

Are there things you would like to do if you had more time?

Do you have siblings?

- birth order
- get along with them?
- if no: would you like them?

How about your parents – do you get along with them?

- live with parent(s)?
- ever talk to them about school? friends? your activities?
- if divorced: when? how do you feel about that?

Have you always lived in Edison?

- in this house?
- in this neighborhood?
- do you like it here?

Do you ever think about what your life will be like after you leave this school?

What do you hope you will be doing in 5 years from now?

What do you hope your life will be like 5 years from now?

- probe on aspirations last questions

Anything else you'd like to tell me about yourself?

Next: shadowing.

- how to get in touch (text?)
- what days
- where & when to meet up in morning

*Second Student Interview (fall 12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

What's changed in your life since June?

What did you do this summer?

- Job?
- Travel?
- College visits?
- Summer school?
- Typical summer or not? Good summer?
- Driver's license?
- Car?
- Contact info still the same?

Tell me about your schedule this year.

What classes? What you wanted?

Like teachers so far?

Early release: why or why not?

How do you feel about being a senior?

What does this, your senior year, look like for you?

- Same as last year?
- New things? (school, family, dating, friends, activities)
- More or less homework?

I'd like to know about every single time you talked to your counselor last year. Do you remember the first time you did? [then follow up 2<sup>nd</sup> – n<sup>th</sup>]

- Personal issues?
- Academic guidance?
- Schedule changes?
- How do you feel about your counselor?
- How do you feel about how often you meet?
- Do you talk to your assigned counselor, or someone else?

I want to reflect on last year a little. How did you get to where you are right now [classes, activities]?

Did you choose or plan what you'll do this summer/fall? Or did it just happen?

How did you get into the classes you're in?

Let's talk about testing.

- How did the HSPA go?
- Pass? If not, what now?
- Did you take the SAT?
- Plan to?
- Why?
- Prep?
- Goal scores?
- Did you take any AP exams?
- Plan to?
- Why?

What about this NCLB thing and the transferring to JP –

- What are people saying about it?
- Do you know anyone who's transferring?
- Would you have considered it (if not a senior e.g.)?

What was it like for you when I was following you around for the day?

- Did you do anything different?

What's changed or different for you since you've been in this research study?

I'd like to know who you hung out with most last year, not because I'm going to contact them or anything, just because I'm interested. Would you write down here all the people you spent the most time with last year? (include school friends, out-of-school friends, family, anyone else)

Has that list changed now or do you think it will?

What do you **hope** you will be doing 1 year from now?

- Probe details
- How did you get these goals?

What do you **think** you will be doing 1 year from now?

- Why?
- Different from **hope**?
- What would help you achieve those goals?

What do your parents think you're like?

Are they right?

What don't they know about you?

What do your parents want for you, a year from now?

What are you looking forward to in next 3 months?

What are you afraid of or nervous about in next 3 months?

*Third Student Interview (spring 12<sup>th</sup> grade)*

**\*\* dig out serendipity, unexpected, how they feel about an unknown future. \*\***

What's new?

(IF) How do you feel about graduating & leaving high school?

What are you doing the week of graduation?

- For the summer?
- In the fall?

How did you decide that that's what you were going to do?

Did you choose or plan what you'll do this summer/fall? Or did it just happen?

When did you first know that you would \_\_\_\_\_? Did you know in a moment, or gradually?

Looking back over your high school experience, can you tell me the story of how you got to (FALL PLANS)?

Were there any important people who influenced your choices? (teachers, counselors, parents, friends)

Think back to the beginning of your junior year. Is this what you thought you'd be doing?



What did your counselor say about what you ought to do or what you are doing after high school?

- Teachers?
- Parents?
- Friends?
- Classmates?

Do you think you will stay in touch with your high school friends? (Where are they going/what are they doing?)

How has your relationship with your parents changed over high school?

What's your overall feeling about your high school experience, compared to what you expected?

If there's one thing you could change or do differently, what would it be? Magically change something?

How did your classes work out this year?

- Happy with them?
- Happy with your grades?
- Did you take any AP exams?
- Plan to?
- Why?
- SAT – did you study?

- How about the HSPA/SRA?

What are you afraid of or nervous about in next 3 months? (ie summer)

What are you looking forward to in next 3 months?

What about the next year – afraid of or nervous about?

And looking forward to over the next year?

(Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?)

I would like to be able to keep in touch with you and see how things go for you in the future. Is that ok?

What contact information should I use for you?

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Just in case that changes, will you give me the name & phone/email/address of 2 different people who will definitely know how to get ahold of you?

Name:

Relationship:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Name:

Relationship:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Thank you so much for being part of this study!!

*Fourth Student Interview (follow-up, spring 2012)*

What's happening in your life right now?

Tell me about a normal day now – yesterday or whatever was the most recent typical day

- from the time you got up to the time you went to bed.

[If not in college]

Did you start college or another school?

- Which one?
- What was that like?
- Why did you stop?
- Do you want to go back, or to go to another school?
- [and all questions below about the college they attended]

[If never in college]

Did you consider going?

Why didn't you go?

[If in college; repeat for each school if there are more than 1]

What college or school do you go to?

What is college like?

In what ways has college been different from high school?

In what ways has it been the same?

How long have you been going there?

What courses did you take? Did you like them? Required or elective?

- Enumerate individually

Did you like your teachers?

What was the workload like (hard or easy, like or dislike)?

How much homework do you do?

- % of assigned
- hours

How are your grades?

Is that where you thought you would go? How did you pick that one?

Did you apply other places?

Where did you get in?

Where did you decide NOT to apply?

Do you plan to go back to school next term?

Do you plan to get a degree or certificate?

- Which one?
- What major?

Do you plan to continue school after you are done at this one?

- E.g., Transfer from County

How are you paying for school?

- Loans

- Did you apply for any?
- Scholarships
  - Did you apply for any?
- Parents helping you?
  - Officially (tuition) or unofficially (like meals, clothes)
- Working
- Do you have debt already? How much?

How much does your school cost?

- Tuition
- Dorming
- Books
- Food
- misc

Do you have a job?

- Where? Same place as in high school?
- How many hours?
- Like it?
- How much money do you make?
- How did you get or find this job?
- Related to your career/aspirations?

In retrospect, who was most influential in you choosing this path?

- This particular school?

In retrospect, did you make the right choice?

Any regrets?

Where do you live?

- Parents, roommates, etc
- How is that going?
- What you wanted?
- What you expected?

Do you commute to school or work?

Do you have a car?

- How do you pay for gas & repairs & insurance?

What did you do the summer after high school?

What did you do the summer after that?

What do you do outside school or work?

- Socializing/partying
- Going out to eat/movies/shopping
- Organized activities like sports, religious events

What about your friends?

- Do you have the same friends as in high school?
- Same crowd?
- Any unexpected changes, like people you never thought you'd hang out with & now are? People you thought you'd stay in touch with but haven't?

Do you date anyone?

- Boyfriend or girlfriend? How long?
- Parents know about it?
- Parents know the person?
- Living together?
- Serious?

What do you do on weekends?

Are there things you would like to do if you had more time?

How about your parents – do you get along with them?

- ever talk to them about school? friends? your activities?

Do you ever go back to the high school?

- How often?
- To visit whom?

In what ways do you think you have changed since high school?

In what ways do you think you are the same since high school?

Think about what's happened with your life these past two years – did you plan it, or did it just happen to you?

- How did you decide how to handle leaving high school?
  - o And going to college or not going?

Looking back, are you satisfied with your high school experience?

Are you satisfied with what you've done in the two years since?

Is this where you thought you would be?

What are your plans for the next year?

What are you worried about or nervous about for the next year?

What do you hope you will be doing in 5 years from now?

What do you hope your life will be like 5 years from now?

Is there anything I forgot to ask about that's happened in the last two years?



Add any questions specific to each person's situation.

*Parent interview.*

How is life different for your child this year, when he/she is a senior?

How is life different for YOU this year, when your child is a senior?

I know there's an amazing amount of work parents do for kids. What is that like on a day-to-day basis now?

How do you feel about your child's school?

Probe for:

Do you go there

For events? Or what?

talk to teachers

the school you wanted?

What sorts of classes is child taking this year? How did child end up in those specific classes?

Probe for:

guidance counselor role

parent advocacy at school

disagreements between parent & child about course load

reasons for these classes

Do you ever talk to child about homework or school work?

Tell me about a time you had a problem with the school.

What sorts of things does your child do outside school? How involved in that are you  
(transportation, money, coaching, anything else?)

Does your child have friends at the school? Outside school?

What are child's friends like?

Probe for:

cliques or subgroup

like or dislike them

know or unaware

know friends' parents?

how long have you known friends/friends' parents?

What do you hope your child will do after graduation? (summer, fall, longer term)

What do you hope your child will be doing in 5 years?

What do you hope your child's life will be like in 5 years?

Were there things you thought about, but decided against, for your child this summer or fall?

(If applying for college: ) where did your child apply? Where did they get in? Where did they think about but decide against applying/attending?

Will you tell me about what you did after high school?

Graduate?

More schooling? What/where exactly?

What is your current job?

Like it?

Satisfied with it?

know what you wanted in high school?

Is this what you expected to be doing?

Would you want this job or something like it for your child?

Do you ever talk to your child about what he or she will do after graduation?

Probe for:

toward college/work/etc?

does child bring this up, or do parents?

**Part of what I want to know is how parents figure out how to help their children through leaving high school. What's that been like for you?**

**How do you figure out what to talk to your child about, or find out options for him/her?**

Do you have other children? Tell me about them – ages (older/younger), what they're doing, etc.

If older:

how did older child get through highschool transition?

are there things you would like to do differently now with your second child?

If younger:

how do you find out about the things you're "supposed" to be doing for child, or do you feel "in the lurch"?

Have you done any activities together that help child figure out what child wants to do?

Probe for:

college visits or searches

discussions about career or jobs

talk about SAT or other specific college prep

Do you ever talk to your friends or coworkers about your child's plans for the future?

Do you ever talk to counselors or teachers or anyone at the school about your child's plans?

What, in your opinion, is the ideal role of a parent of a high school senior?

What are some of the things that hinder/ help you live up to this ideal?

*Teacher interview.*

I want to get a sense of your role here at the school. What classes do you teach this semester/year?

Probe for details on anything they bring up:

levels or tracks

what types of students they see

typical/atypical year

Where do your courses fit into the curriculum?

what your duty is

any clubs you advise

What is your career/teaching history?

What certifications or degrees do you have?

I'm interested in how students prepare for life after high school. First I want to ask you about the school, then I'll ask about you personally. How do you see the school's role in this process?

- does the school have a mission statement or guiding principle about this?

ask only if they know anything about the school process:

- What programs or classes are run at the school?

Who decides what such programs you run at the school?

- How does that process work? (committee of teachers? includes parents?)

- which of these programs do you run or head, and which are run by other people in the school?

Do you think the school does a good job with post-secondary planning?

division between prep for life vs school/career

What is your individual role in this preparation?

Do you ever talk to students about post-secondary planning?

do you think about this as you plan your lessons?

mentoring

Probe for:

toward college/work/etc?

do students bring this up, or do teachers?

integrated into curriculum?

write letters of recommendation?



I'd like to get a sense of what it's like for a student making his or her way through your school. How is the student's experience at the school different in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, or in 12<sup>th</sup> grade?

What are some of the challenges facing EHS students as they leave high school?

Do you think there is an ideal role of a teacher in helping prepare students for life after high school?

What are some of the things that hinder/ help you live up to this ideal?

Why did you become a teacher?

Do you like being a teacher?

What makes your job as a teacher difficult?

Do you spend any 1-on-1 time with students?

Which types of students are more likely to seek you out and why?

Are there students you would like to see more of?

Are there students you would like to see less of?

Do you have much contact with parents?

When & where?

Do they contact you?

Which types of parents are more likely to seek you out and why?

Are there parents you would like to see more of?

Are there parents you would like to see less of?

Anything else?

=====

I'm happy to interview other teachers as well; if you hear of anyone who wants to talk to me, have them find me!

Has this been a particularly difficult year?

I'm looking for other teachers to interview as well.

Are there other teachers you think are particularly involved, or do a particularly good job, at helping students with their planning?

{Asked first year} Are there teachers you know are retiring this year?

*Counselor interview.*

I want to get a sense of your role here at the school. Could you walk me through a typical workday, from beginning to end?

Probe for details on anything they bring up:

- paperwork: what kind? what purpose?
- interactions with students: how were they arranged? what do they entail?
- programs/classes: how long? content? purpose?

I'm interested in the role of the other counselors at the school too. Can you tell me about the division of labor here, and what specialties people have or are known for?

Probe for:

- is there a special college admissions counselor, or are academic counselors overlapping this function? other sorts of specialized counselors?
- how many students is each counselor responsible for?
- How are students divided among them?
- in what depth are you able to get to know students individually?

I'm interested in how your school prepares students for life after high school. How do you see the school's role in this process?

- does the school have a mission statement or guiding principle about this?

- what is your individual role in this preparation?
- What programs or classes are run at the school?

Who decides what such programs you run at the school?

- How does that process work? (committee of teachers? includes parents?)
- which of these programs do you run or head, and which are run by other people in the school?

I'd like to get a sense of what it's like for a student making his or her way through your school. How is the student's interaction with counselors different in the 11th grade than in other grades?

Thinking of a typical 11th grade student at your school, could you walk me through your relationship with that student over the school year?

What are some of the good and bad things about the contact you have with students?

What are some of the more memorable experiences you have had interacting with parents?

Which types of students are more likely to seek you out and why?

Which students would you like to see more of?

Which students would you like to see less of?

Can you talk a little bit about the contact you have with parents?

What are some of the good and bad things about this contact?

Can you describe your approach to dealing with parents?

What are some of the more memorable experiences you have had interacting with parents?

Which types of parents are more likely to seek you out and why?

Which parents would you like to see more of?

Which parents would you like to see less of?

What, in your opinion, is the ideal role of a counselor in helping prepare students for life after high school?

What are some of the things that hinder/ help you live up to this ideal?

What would your life be like now if you had never become a counselor?

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